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MAKING THE WOUNDED WHOLE: AN INVESTIGATION of HEALING AND IDENTITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THOUGHT

by

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Abstract

MAKING THE WOUNDED WHOLE: AN INVESTIGATION of HEALING AND IDENTITY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THOUGHT

By Derek S. Hicks

The research approach governing my work is interdisciplinary, including religious history, hermeneutics, theology, and sociology of religion with an emphasis on the intersections of religion and culture. My dissertation uncovers notions of healing through an attempt to transform social and racial reality within African American Christian thought and life. Making the Wounded Whole challenges the dominant assumption that black Christianity, is governed by a primary theological focus on corporate liberation. Accordingly, it uncovers a deep concern with healing—in relation to bodily, political, spiritual, and social restoration—as a theological thrust fueling black Christian religion. I reveal this concern through an interrogation of the bio-political and socio-political significance of enslavement and its consequences. This theme of healing and identity (re)formation manifests itself within various aspects of religious life and activity—among them are ritual and worship, aesthetic presentation, Scriptural interpretation, and general resistance to racial oppression. I argue that such practices are in consequence therapeutic, in that social and political imagination is recast in ways more suitable for a healthy existence. I locate these practices as a particular style of religious life and therefore a way of understanding the nature of black Christian experience. Ultimately, this work connects these ideas to normative Christo-religious practices found within the black enslaved experience during the antebellum period.
For Sadie & Clarke, 

My exemplar & my dove

*In Memoriam*

Wilman Dean, Sr., Albert Johnson, Wilman Dean, Jr., & Lewis McGlothen,

My fictive fathers
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"Church Pews, Libraries, and Coffee Houses" could very well have been the title of my dissertation as I reflect on the people and places that have been an integral part of this process. This journey began at my church during the summer of 2002. It was there that my pastor, Rev. Dr. T.R. Williams, introduced a young man who was entering Rice University as the first African American doctoral student in Religious Studies. That day I met that young man, Stephen C. Finley, and we discussed the program. I expressed how interested I too was in Ph.D. study in religion and happened to mention that I had just read a book by a scholar named Anthony Pinn. To my surprise and delight I found out the Dr. Pinn would soon come to Rice as a visiting professor of religion. Further conversations led to a subsequent meeting with Dr. Pinn and, with his help, the application process. I have never looked back and I am so grateful for having been given this opportunity.

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Introduction: A Formulary to a Story of Wholeness

"Lord it’s so hard, living this life, 
a constant struggle each and ev’ry day. 
Some wonder why
I’d rather die, than to continue living this way. 
Many are blind and cannot find
The truth ‘cuz no one seems to really know.
But I won’t except, that this is how it’s ‘gon be
Devil you got ‘ta let me and my people go!
‘Cuz I wanna be free, completely free,
Lord won’t you please come and save me.
I wanna be free, totally free,
I’m not ‘gon let this world worry me."

—Goodie Mob, Free

"I’m so happy we made it, I knew one day we would, 
All these years of strugglin’ were never understood 
Now my eyes are open, and I can finally see, 
We weren’t dyin’ for nothin’ ‘cuz we are finally free!"¹

—Goodie Mob, The Day After

Both religion and suffering are historical realities for African Americans. This may seem a trite statement, but the extent to which these realities represent dimensions of black existence in this country remains a major scholarly quest. The undertaking of this dissertation shall be to seriously account for afflictions that were placed upon African Americans through hegemony and subjugation and their religious responses to these afflictions. This dissertation will therefore engage and interrogate African American

¹ Goodie Mob, Soul Food, 1995.
religious praxis in response to socio-political and physical afflictions. Indeed, affliction forms a backdrop and is readily identifiable within places and circumstances that are not unfamiliar: institutionalized slavery and its resulting consequences and racial oppression in general.

This intellectual project has roots in my personal upbringing. I was one of those kids "raised in the church." In fact there were times I thought "all black folks" went to church, well if they weren't in the Nation of Islam, of course. But these were the primary religious options of the day in my neighborhood. While I eventually learned that this was not the case, I remained convinced that many people in my south-central Los Angeles community, or Watts to be more precise, did in fact go to church. On my street, 104th, we all seemed to be on our way to different churches at the same time on Sunday morning. "Square" kids and adolescent gangsters alike piled into the back seats of cars in their Sunday best. My premise was by no means one that held to a notion that blacks were somehow more innately religious than other races of people. Rather, from what I observed in my youth, there seemed to be a Christian, or at least a church going, core of people in my community.

The harshness of what life had to offer was often tempered by a religious ideology that firmly held with confidence that God would "make a way out of no way" for those who suffered in an unfair world. When I would hear the old church ladies make this exclamation I would often question God's desire and ability to make a way. Added to this would be my concern that God would or could bring about an end to their sufferings. "God is omnipotent," I thought, "so why not?" The unfortunate reality was that as I surveyed my community I was often left with more questions than answers about God's
desire and intent for black folks. I was among the “good” kids (by way of perception only) in my L.A. neighborhood. I went to private schools and got reasonably good grades. I was on the fast track to college without much say in the matter. But I remained vexed by the social plight of most in my community.

The formative occasion that ignited my quest to seek answers to questions surrounding God and black folks occurred in 1998 over a seemingly uneventful lunch with a co-worker. At that time, I was employed as a Senior Underwriter and Supervisor for Kaiser Permanente in Pasadena, California. Oftentimes certain formative occasions come unannounced and without the resounding clamor that one might expect from a life-altering event. Such was the case that autumn day in 1998. It was during a one-hour lunch that my co-worker stressed, with great zeal, the “wrongs” of “Euro-American Christianity,” as he framed it. In a lengthy diatribe he simply reduced this religion to an oppressive element in North American culture and society that has kept African Americans in bondage. While I conceived of potential viable responses, I quickly realized that none of them would appropriately broach the subject with any merit to match the ferocity of his claims. In short, I was ill-equipped to challenge his possible misconceptions on the subject or to express the transformative influence Christianity had on the slave culture and beyond.

That occasion found a sticking place within me. To be sure, it harkened me back to my own upbringing and, to a degree, helped to set the tone for my future educational and vocational goals. In looking at my personal history I realize that the strength to overcome was instilled in me from an early age. Much of what I learned in terms of responding to the negatives of life came through the church. I was born in Los Angeles,
California, to Frank Scott Hicks and Renae Dean. I was born out of wedlock to a loving mother and a father whom, even to this very day, I have never met, nor seen on a photograph, nor heard his voice, or even read comforting words from him written on paper. All that I know of him is what I have read on my birth certificate—his name, “Frank Scott Hicks;” his age at the time, “35;” his occupation, “special guard;” his state of origin, “Ohio;” and his race, “Negro.”

Compounding this unfortunate reality, my mother was unable to fully care for me due to physical and emotional problems of her own, which plague her to this day. I was therefore left in the hands of my maternal grandparents, Wilman and Sadie Dean. This family structure was adversely altered when I was seven years old when my grandfather, only 60 years of age, died of lung cancer. I suppose at the time my grandmother felt somewhat helpless as she surveyed the very real prospect of raising a boy alone in the Watts section of Los Angeles. The job was made more difficult given the fact that Watts, at that time, was a hotbed for rampant gangbanging activity with young black boys often the unfortunate targets.

My grandmother always offered me alternative views to what prevailed in my immediate surroundings. During my early young adult years, however, these sensibilities were summarily tested when six of my friends died in a four-year span. Four of them were brutally murdered, none of them were out of their twenties. Dealing with these experiences prompted me to hold steadfast to the transformative power of my own faith. Not only so, these experiences, in conjunction with that formative lunch with my co-worker (which took place around the time of some of the deaths) churned an unquenchable desire to assess the ways in which religion has the power to transform
person, history, and culture. Most importantly, I desired to know how religion could have such an impact on a society where the reality of pervasive death, physical or social, was so overwhelming and forbidding. This concern prompted a question about the nature of religion in the lives of those who came long before me. I therefore sought to know why slaves in large numbers converted to Christianity in light of the religion being used as a tool to maintain oppression and how, given this, the slaves were empowered by and through this religion to endure.

These concerns about the nature of the Christian experience of blacks in this country led me to seminary and later to pursue a Ph.D. I began to look differently at the spirituality I experienced in the “Black Church.” Instead of seeing the church strictly through the lens of what happens on Sunday morning, I began to consider the nature and impact of the religion on lives in general. Through this purview Christianity began to take on new qualities that related more to the ways it equips and affects the identity of a people. I began seeing this religion for its ability to reestablish a “broken” people and change their posture in a world that seeks their destruction. Christianity within this analysis, then, becomes a process of restructuring, meaning making, healing, and self-amending. This work is represents my attempt to shed light on the manner in which Christianity functions this way for African Americans. My task in shedding light on this function will unfold through an investigation of the antebellum slave experience.

My Basic Argument

In this dissertation I argue that black Christian practice in the antebellum South encompasses a proactive engagement with culture and society, encouraging a radical
questioning of biblically justified socio-political maltreatment. This activity necessitates a push to use the tools at their disposal to ameliorate one's existence in the world and is motivated by a desire to be fully counted in society as fully human. That is, the subjugated make use of the very religious language intended to enhance and further advance human suffering. The analysis offered here critically inquires as to whether healing is available for an oppressed "people of God." And if there is and suffering persists, what might be the available proof that healing on any level has or can take place?

I employ a part phenomenological and part interpretive approach to more fully assess the black experience of suffering and oppression while illuminating a certain nature of black Christianity in the antebellum South. In so doing, the fruit of its efforts will be that foundationally black experiences and practices of Christianity are infused with an impulse to readjust hegemonic forces that prevail against black America through a refashioning activity that has a curative underpinning and outcome. This activity entails a refashioning of racist formulations of Christianity. It will focus on healing practices within black experience as the identifying marker of this type of activity—taking the form of magical practices and conjurational sensibilities to affect a cure to bio-political and socio-political ills. All of these practices entail refashioning activity, which forms the basis of what will become the nature of the Christian experience that will unfold in the pages that follow.

Ultimately, this dissertation will uncover a deep concern with healing and health fueling black Christianity. I reveal this concern through an interrogation of the bio-political and socio-political significance of enslavement and its consequences. This
concern manifests itself within various aspects of religious life and activity—among them are ritual and worship, aesthetic presentation, scriptural interpretation, and general resistance to racial oppression. I argue that such practices are in consequence therapeutic in that social and political imagination is recast in ways more suitable for a healthy existence. I locate these practices as a particular style of religious life and therefore a way of understanding the nature of black Christian experience and thought. The reader will notice a curative\(^2\) cord running through this dissertation that forms the basis for a pharmacopeic center to black Christian thought and life. By way of the term *pharmacopeic* I seek to draw attention to the varied and multitudinous elements as well as the performative nature of these curative-healing practices. What will become clear is the extent to which these practices are present within various everyday activities of Christian life. This idea becomes important in understanding how I will use black exegetical engagement with the Bible and other facets of Christian life.\(^3\) I conclude by arguing that the function of the Christianity practiced by antebellum slaves was one of perpetual and active socio-political engagement with hegemonic culture, through which the oppressed were able to recast themselves as whole people and change their posture in the face of dire suffering. Before identifying the way this argument unfolds in the chapters, a discussion of selected current literature on the subject is appropriate.

\(^2\) The term “curative” is most often related to an agent used for curing diseases. As utilized in this dissertation, the term is meant to convey that the religious practices described herein offered the slave a socio-political and bio-political healing balm, even a fortification in the face of oppression. This fortification manifested itself within various forms of communal interaction. This curative balm ultimately acted as a agent against racist maltreatment from slaveholders. As a curing element this type of religious understanding gave the slaves pride and esteem, which often helped to temper their anger at slavery. Hence, the curative elements religion fostered a new self-understanding and reinforced constructive responses to slavery.

\(^3\) These ideas are developed in conversation with Theophus Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 6. Full reference below. More on this text is presented later in this proposal.
Literature Review

This dissertation seeks to contribute to current treatment of African American religion's function as curative enterprise. In this way, I see this project extending the work of scholars such as Theophus Smith and Yvonne Chireau. Both scholars have addressed the issue of conjure—as a practice to produce a material cure—from two separate and, for my purposes, helpful perspectives. I begin with Chireau. In her text, Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition (2003), Chireau argues that within the religious (most notably Christian) practices of blacks during and after the antebellum period, there existed a potent tradition of conjure. This tradition brought together religious sensibilities of West and Central Africa, Europe, and North America. That such practices were evident within Christian practices was for Chireau unmistakable, she exclaims for example that

The relationship between Conjure and Christianity, seen according to the perspective of the preacher, was inimical. Seen from another perspective, however, the story suggests that the charm was beneficial, providing a power that supplemented the minister's own spiritual gifts. For him, the Conjure hand delivered immediate results, while his own religious faith lacked the guarantee of efficacy.4

Notice here that she acknowledges the resonant tension between these spiritual practices and perspectives for the adherent. Yet, the supplemental nature of this seemingly odd partnership produced a spiritual formation potent for countering adverse social circumstances.

Taking the form of harming/healing practices, conjure, blended with Christianity, offered the enslaved a potent tool for life maintenance, overcoming of oppression, even resistance. Chireau asserts an ultimate concern with the actual experiences that gave rise

to the introduction of "magic" into that complex generally recognized as "religion" in black American experience.\(^5\) Magic is utilized principally for personal ends. Reflecting on these historical ideas, Chireau links these religious practices to a useful ideal for this work. She argues that African American practices of conjure are equipped with a "curative intention" to "revise and re-vision" conditions of violence and racial victimization.\(^6\) What becomes clear from Chireau's efforts are the mechanisms put in place through conjuring practices for self-defense according to spiritual beliefs. In the end, such practices are linked to the ongoing black struggle of good against evil that plagued humankind.\(^7\) Her very important emphasis upon active re-vision of social reality, however, lacks an important advancement beyond the descriptive. Let us consider Chireau and Smith's work as they function in tandem with respect to my critique.

In his book * Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (1994), Smith presents a forceful, interdisciplinary analysis of the transformative power of the Judeo-Christian sacred text, the Bible, in the lives of African Americans. His investigation brings together principles of hermeneutics, history, theology, sociology of religion, phenomenology, and anthropology. In so doing, Smith endeavors to show the ways in which the Bible has offered African Americans "prescriptions for reenvisioning and, therein, transforming history and culture."\(^8\) To this end, this text highlights the significance of conjure as both a means of transforming reality in response to abject suffering, through the use of the Bible as a magical formulary, and as a new conceptual

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\(^6\) Ibid., 8.

\(^7\) Ibid., 92.

paradigm for understanding black spirituality. Biblical interpretation from a formal perspective has been combined here with African American “folk” theological perspectives to develop an interpretive strategy that not only brings the Bible to life in the black experiential context, but also transforms that life with curative power. Smith’s result: a people reformed and formed by the Bible.

Smith proffers this assessment by looking at the ways in which the conjuring tradition of West Africa (among other places) influences the black biblical hermeneutic. Conjure, according to Smith, “is a magical means of transforming reality.” The term “magic,” as used here, connotes a system of mapping and managing the world in the form of signs. Rather than considering such phenomena merely irrational or marginal, to be relegated to the unintelligible realm of the supernatural or to the heterodox realm of the occult, Smith regards magic as a primordial and enduring system of communication—as a form of language. Conjure, therefore, works as an agent to usurp the language or projection of the signifier with a new reconstructive language representative of the signified. The supernatural elements of conjure reset reality for the purposes of healing/curing (pharmacopeia) the subject. The resulting “healing” can be understood as the ultimate care of self, which alleviates the toxicity of hegemony. To that end, the subjugated is renewed and transformed.

Smith argues that the biblical wisdom embedded within the African American biblical hermeneutic is a “radical questioning” of the status quo. This form of questioning allows the subjugated to ask theodical questions regarding their existence and belief and trust in God. The results are radical critiques of religious experience.

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9 Ibid., 4.
10 Ibid.
constituted in biblical books like Job (theodicy) and Ecclesiastes (resignation), for example. The radical questioning of the status quo is but one element of Smith's formulation of black biblical formation. The second element is what he argues, like Chireau, is a curative intention within conjurational performances, which employ biblical figures for the purpose of reenvisioning and transforming lived experience and social reality.  

To be sure, the work of Smith and Chireau is important, yet they fail to move beyond descriptions of the convergences of these often opposing spiritual practices. Both argue for a curative outcome of this conjurational activity, which directly feeds my project. However, what these texts come short of offering is a distinct understanding of the nature of this "new" African American Christian practice as a result of this cultural mingling. A hermeneutic turn, offering an interpretation of these practices, is thus required. While we gain from these works the possibilities of a Christian-conjure convergence, notably with respect to a style of engaging the Bible, the next helpful step would be to identify this activity as a distinct practice that points us back to the social and historical realities giving rise to it. That is, in what ways does a Christian-conjure religious expression particularly address the ills of slavery, social death, or the random physical killing of black bodies? This dissertation will interpret these practices to uncover a distinct stylistic form of Christian practice partly rooted in the complex web they lay out. Therefore, this project not only describes these practices but also give a name to them that more clearly reflects the nature and function of black religion. I am concerned with the ways in which healing in general, by way of notions, impulses,

11 Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 142.
12 Ibid., 18.
ritualistic styles, or governing religious practices, reveals the very essence of black
religion. While they describe certain practices informing faith, I will diagnose a
hermeneutical way of capturing an aggregate structure of black Christianity that fortifies
a broken people. I do this in conversation with recent developments in hermeneutical
approaches to the study of black religion.

The issue of the nature of black religion has been taken up by Anthony Pinn in his
vision and perspective on black religion's nature and meaning through the use of
historical manifestations with the goal of identifying responses to terror and dread. In so
doing, he offers "relational centralism" as a tool to demonstrate that the quest for
complex subjectivity is the core of black religion. This quest is identified by a desire or
feeling for more life meaning.¹⁴ Marked by a profound sense of urgency, this text
unfolds in a move from "data"—historical manifestations and happenings—to "theory"—
of religion and its nature and activity within the lives of blacks. He begins with a framing
of the ways in which the "Negro" or New World African became objectified in history.
This framing considers the initial cultural contact between Europeans and Africans.
Governed by an ideal of what was considered aesthetically beautiful, Europeans
considered Africans as ugly "others" and inferior. The process of "othering" made
Africans more usable, offering the ultimate justification for the commodification of black
bodies through slavery.

The significance of Pinn's work in *Terror and Triumph* for this dissertation lies in
his analysis of the functionality of Christianity. For him this form of religious life and

¹⁴ Ibid., 173.
experience is marked by certain and charged activity toward securing fuller life meaning for the oppressed. Such activity is most clearly revealed in what Pinn calls “perpetual rebellion” on behalf of black bodies caught within the confines of oppression. Within this realm, Pinn asserts that there exists “a continuing concern with liberation from dehumanization, but it is understood that struggle may not provide the desired results.”\textsuperscript{15} For Pinn, success within this system rests within the process (of perpetual rebellion) rather than within a desired outcome. That is to say, though a particular outcome is desired, realization of this outcome need not ever manifest in order for success to be ascribed to the struggler or the struggle. This process is governed by a norm that facilitates and struggle for more. Liberation is the norm; perpetual rebellion is the process.\textsuperscript{16}

Pinn’s work, while a useful model, does not fully capture the presiding element of healing that pervades African American religiosity. Further, while he understands Christianity as a “historical manifestation of [black] religiosity,”\textsuperscript{17} in the process of forging identity, a perspective I share, this dissertation will offer a more focused analysis of the ways in which this core “quest for complex subjectivity” gets expressed in actions such as biblical interpretation and healing practices. I seek a diagnosis of a particular manifestation of this quest and resulting perpetual movement. This dissertation is in part about the production of an alternate hermeneutic and framing of Christianity. My work is both of a particular diagnosis of concrete action as well as the description of a permeable element within black Christianity.

\textsuperscript{15} Pinn, \textit{Terror and Triumph}, 153.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 81.
Also paramount is Pinn’s assertion that the slave auction—as the definitive early event within North American history—and nineteenth and twentieth century widespread practice of lynching significantly contributed to the construction of identity in the face of distinct terror. Yet, while appropriate and rewarding for our current purposes, I desire a more general discussion of the socio-political and bio-political arrangements that gave rise to and allowed for such practices to thrive. I consider these two practices as parts of a larger framework of social placement wherein the black body could be killed arbitrarily without fear of retribution or juridical consequence. The early part of this dissertation will tease out this issue. In terms of how these issues get formed in antebellum history and legal studies the work historian James Oakes in *The Radical and the Republic* and Mark Tushnet’s *Slave Law in the American South* are useful sources. Principally these texts will aid in the framing of an argument about chattel slavery that gives particular attention to slave codes and status of slaves solely as property versus broader ideas of personhood. In this case, the extent to which remedy by way of the courts is available to slaves plays a significant role in how they are treated within certain defined geographic spaces. Of note as well are critical race and legal theorists such as Cheryl Harris and Neil Gotanda, who take up the issue of the relationship between concepts of race and property more generally, and issues of black bodies as legal property of the white planter class more specifically.

Giving strict attention to healing and health practices by slaves in response to bio-political conditions, Sharla M. Fett’s *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slave Plantations* (2002) is essential for its exploration of the complex history of slave practices of health and healing. Paramount in her discussion is the role the
oppressive realities of slavery played in the everyday coping mechanisms employed by the enslaved. Fett’s ultimate argument, which is clearly laid out throughout the text, is that enslaved African Americans were not passive victims of medical malice, nor were they helpless dependents on white health care. Instead, slaves nurtured a rich health culture, which encompassed ideas from Africa, Europe, and Native Americans. These practices related to general well-being and healing that worked to counter daily abuse, whatever the form. Notable predecessors along this scholarly line are Todd L. Savitt’s *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia* (1981) as well as Savitt and Ronald Numbers’ edited volume, *Science and Medicine in the Old South* (1989) and *Caring and Curing: Health and Medicine in the Western Religious Traditions* (1997).

Contemporary scholarship on the way black bodies were physically treated and mutilated during slavery offers perspective as well. Among the noteworthy examples of this recent scholarship is Harriet Washington’s *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (2007), which places emphasis on the history of maltreatment through experimentation and subject exploitation of black bodies.

Finally, Stephanie Mitchem’s offering in *African American Folk Healing* (2007) is notable. She shows the ways in which herbs, charms, and rituals give light to folk healing performances, revealing that they don’t solely deal with physical healing, but also with expressions of faith in that they delineate aspects of a holistic epistemology. For her, African American folk healing perspectives reveal something about American life, notably with respect to meaning, and being in general. She ultimately argues that black
folk healing indicates how culturally African Americans act as agents in defining their own bodies, exerting some control over life, and constructing identity.

This scholarship on African American healing and health practices, taken in aggregate, discloses the extent of the maltreatment of black bodies and their unique responses to this reality. However, with the possible exception of Mitchem’s work, none of them are principally concerned with the way in which these healing practices are revealed within the African American style of religious practice in response to dire suffering. Healing for my purposes must be channeled within the context of a particular way of understanding black Christian praxis generally. While the bulk of these thorough studies are not equipped to handle such a task, one does find Mitchem’s book a good starting point. However, while she does offer examples of the ways in which folk healing permeates everyday black life—through general expressions, words, rituals, deeds, healing/harming practices, and performance—she fails to pinpoint a iteration of such practices in a particularly religious context. Along such a line, Making the Wounded Whole will make use of these basic findings to, again, diagnose a style of religiosity that better captures the nature and structure of black Christian life.

My Approach to the Examination of Black Christian Experience

This dissertation is governed by a critical question: Why did African and African American slaves choose to convert to Christianity in large numbers? This question by no means presupposes that all, or even most, slaves converted to this religion. Nonetheless, it seems prudent to account for the sheer numbers of Christian slave converts, notably during the antebellum period. However, another question arises, which endeavors to dig
a bit deeper to unpack the appealing features of Christianity for the antebellum slave. That is, what were the nascent features within Christianity that offered slaves transformative possibilities to aid them in dealing with their absurd socio-political circumstances?

This analysis will follow along two interrelated tracks: a study of cultural and folk traditions that affected the early African American’s view of the Christian religion and experiential aspects of religious practices after conversion to Christianity. Accordingly, I will explore the inherent tension that resulted from an early African American interface with Christianity. I intend to show that such a tension—that is, the acceptance of the oppressor’s religion—surfaced as they attempted to reconcile slaveholding versions of Christianity with biblical themes of justice, deliverance, and freedom. Consequently, this study will interpret the appropriation methods slaves employed to make conversion to the Christian religion a reality. By “appropriation” I mean the way in which slaves literally refashioned biblical themes to make sense of their own socio-political circumstances. I will attempt to do this by disclosing how they assimilated Christian religious culture by adopting certain biblical stories and themes, accounts of miracles, and prophetic writings.

To uncover the early cord of African American Christian thought, I will examine the way in which folk culture, utilizing symbols and myths, aided and affected the slaves’ biblical interpretation and desire for conversion in light of their experience as oppressed peoples. From these folk cultural practices, I will labor to uncover a theme of healing and health. These terms for my purposes represent a desire to fully represent one’s humanity with agency in matters of self-definition socially and physically. As a result,
by way of perpetual activity to bring about this healing, I will disclose a meaning and
nature of Christianity in the life of the antebellum slave.

Within this study, I will employ a hermeneutical analysis in exposing early
African American socio-political interaction and religious experience. I will attempt to
clarify representative signs and symbols marking the nature of black antebellum
communal existence. With regard to Christian practices, my concern falls outside of a
strict on the personal salvation through saving faith in Christ or personal piety. Rather,
this investigation looks at the alternate ways in which the Gospel message functioned
within the lives of the oppressed through the projection of biblical themes, symbolism,
and mimetic performance (e.g., relating to Jesus more as a co-suffering servant).

The Layout of the Argument

The initial chapter considers the social placement of the black body and argues for
this reality as a viable backdrop to a distinctive religious impulse. This chapter outlines a
hermeneutical methodology for capturing the “raw” data. I will do so by taking seriously
what I call the social placement of enslaved black bodies—that is, the social results of the
way in which black bodies were treated and utilized during the antebellum period.

Drawing on the previous chapter, chapter two taps into the issue of social
placement by paying particular attention to the commodification of black bodies. It
teases out the resident paradox of these bodies being viewed as commodities of principle
gain and wealth for their owners and the southern slaveocracy in aggregate, while
simultaneously being objectified as spectacles of horror. I have subtitled this section
“The Anti-Beauty Project and Splendor of the Flesh” in an attempt to highlight the extent
to which this process was at once simultaneous and yet encompassed polar extremes,
institutionalized and yet random. Black flesh existed as splendor, as part wondrous
spectacle. Conversely, institutional slavery sought, as a principle function and aim, to
make black bodies ugly, putrid, worthy only of extreme labor and ostracizing.

Chapter two then seeks a better understanding of the phenomenon of “black”
history. The bare life exemplified by these bodies vis-à-vis experiential reality only
remains included in politics in the form of exception, that is, included solely through
exclusion. Accordingly, black social placement as Homo Sacer is useful for the
purposes of this chapter. Agamben introduces the concept of the ban in the sense that the
sovereign forces Homo Sacer, whose existence and function is similar to that of the
Wolfman, to the fringes of society because it exists as a terrifying spectacle to those who
observe it. In this sense, the Homo Sacer is excluded from the community from a certain
type of inclusion—defined or marked existence by the sovereign. Projecting this black
sacred-man-as-wolfman, we will test it by way of connection with another potent theory
with respect to black Christian bodies—that of the Scapegoat within African American
experiential context. I will employ religious scholar Theophus Smith’s framing of the
scapegoat concept (as drawn from the work of Rene Girard) in his text, Conjuring
Culture. Smith advances this concept according to the ancient Greek scapegoat, which
was a human being called a pharmakos (a curative healing).

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18 See Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (Stanford: Stanford
19 Agamben, Homo Sacer, 77.
Ultimately, this chapter inquires whether or not curative/healing notions be drawn from the black body once assessed religiously? What does it mean that healing can be drawn from it and who gets healed in the process? Most importantly, does this black body as scapegoat itself reveal pharmakos or are curative notions best gained through viewing it in terms of the banned Wolfman, which encourages healing notions through action? This chapter shows, then, that curative/healing notion, construed religiously, can be seen as pervasive and fluid within multiple levels of black religious experience, good or bad. In fact, healing notions function independent of a good/bad dichotomy as the communal body, like the physiological make up of the human body, is infused with an innate mechanism toward its own healing even if it never experience a tragic calamity.

Chapter three probes the significance of private space as the arena for oppression. It thus gives special attention to the important role a “state of exception,” as Agamben would have us consider it, plays in the making of history. I briefly assess his view of the Nazi death camp as a mechanism of terror in light of the way I want to frame one of the primary functions of the plantation. These camps were defined “private” spaces where sovereignty could be freely exerted against their victims without fear consequence for its actions. Along the lines of the way these privates spaces, functioning as mechanisms of terror, effect human dignity, Beverly Mitchell’s work on the plantation and death camps is appraised. My fundamental argument here is that unlike ritual sacrifice, which entails public spectacle that potentially has consequences, within private spaces these bodies were killed and treated without sanctuary. The stripping of minimal levels of human dignity reinforced the ability of these defined spaces to maintain special social order. I argue as well that these spaces are not fixed and can change over time.
In the African American context, I argue that antebellum slave plantations and, to a large degree, the U.S. South at that time, functioned in a similar manner. Within this U.S. south, a state of exception existed wherein white planters, white physicians, lynch mobs, and southern aristocracy in general could maintain slave order even if it denied human rights from the slaves. Further, juridical order helped to establish the illegality of their practices through legal sanction—for example, the Fugitive Slave Act and state statutes prohibiting slaves from learning to read or from meeting in groups. All of these prohibitions, in conjunction with the realities and consequences of slave order, fully offered the luxury a state of exception affords the sovereign.

The last three chapters disclose the principle function of Christian religiosity as practiced by blacks in the U.S. Its thematic overtone is extracted from the last word of this dissertation’s title, being whole. It advances a theory of the mechanisms and results of this experientially Christian healing process. Accordingly, chapter four identifies the internal desire to be considered fully human and the active push to be made whole through religion. Framed within an idea of a self-amending process, I show that antebellum blacks sought to recast themselves and their identities. In searching for the innate qualities of this quest I make use of the work of Michel Foucault who presents a framework understanding what he considers the ethical practices of the self. This self-concern and desire for a healthier state of general being offers an ideological backdrop to the mechanism of black Christianity described in the last two chapters. As such African Americans, as part of the process of gaining entrance into ideological safe-spaces undefined by sovereign will, were forced to give up privacy (afforded them within the state of exception) and cast themselves as public spectacles as the initial step toward
healing by way of religion. In the end, this chapter reveals what I deem a “marker” of black Christianity, or, that identifying attribute revealing its nature.

Chapter five introduces the hermeneutic of reclamation as the primary tool I use to approach the investigation of black religious experience. Taking seriously the challenges posed in chapter one with regard to capturing black religious experience, I reset the hermeneutical discussion by pinpointing a way we might best investigate black religious experience. Establishing and carving out a space for the hermeneutic of reclamation required placing it over and against other hermeneutical devices used by scholars of black religion. Accordingly, I assess the merits the merits of the device I am introducing against the hermeneutic of suspicion and Anthony Pinn’s nitty-gritty hermeneutics and hermeneutic of style. I close with an unpacking of the hermeneutic of reclamation, arguing for its utility in unearthing an active religious engagement among blacks with society and culture. This activity is cast as a style of socio-biblical engagement that has a liberative and curative underpinning and desired end.

The sixth and final chapter employs the hermeneutical tools introduced in chapter five and closes with the theoretical goal of this dissertation: to reveal an alternate way of understanding the essential function of black Christianity. I have coined the name of this essential religious function as curative recalibration. What we have observed thus far is the restorative/curative process whereby the subjugated self is changed to a new self. I speak of “recalibrative” activity in the sense that it is an active engagement, a push to (re)adjust precisely for a particular function.

Recalibration activity within the black religious context thus seeks to change the functionality of hegemonic structures in general and Christian structures in particular.
This activity entails a readjustment of racist forms of Christianity and signifying activity performed by the powerful against the powerless. Within this formulation recalibration is marked by ingenuity in that it makes use of the tools meant to harm or subjugate and adjusts them for transformative use. Transformed in this way, the subjugated actively engages the harmful to find a fuller self and new identity. The very machine (Christianity) functioning according to the oppressor’s “properly” calibrated function is restructured, sometimes in subtle ways, for use by the oppressed.

In the final analysis this investigation represents my coming to terms with the religious expression of my own faith community as a youth and young adult in Los Angeles. This quest began there and there it finds its basis. My interdisciplinary move is indicative of my desire to approach this issue from several angles. My attempt is not solely to make sense of independent markers of black Christian experience, such as worship style, or what is believed about the Christ Event. Rather, I push for an assessment that brings these and other ideas and expressions of black Christianity into a broader cultural discussion of the many ways it functions in black life. What becomes apparent, I hope, is a recalibrational spirituality that pervades the form of Christian praxis herein described and starts to give new meaning to the words spoken to me by the mother of one of my slain young friends as we stood over his casket: “my faith and hope is made stronger today even with my loss.”
Chapter One:

Methodological Considerations: The Challenge of "Black" Religious History and the Hermeneutical Response

So engrained was the U.S. slave system, which relegated human beings and their bodies as living and breathing property, that J. W. C. Pennington, a fugitive slave, termed such a phenomenon the "chattel principle." In this regard, the slave's life, identity, general ability to navigate space might be disrupted as easily as a price could be set and a piece of paper passed from one hand to another.¹ The life of the slave in the antebellum South was a paradox in that black flesh was at once both human and tool, marveled and despised.

Former slave Rev. W. B. Allen recalls the unique nature of slave life in the antebellum United States. His account, concerning the punishment of slaves, reveals the extent of planter sovereignty vis-à-vis slaves' socio-political standing. Slaves were never tried in courts. Rather, they were prosecuted by rule of planter class law. Allen recollects that he "never knew of a slave being guilty of any crime more serious than taking something or violating plantation rules."² Whipping was most often the method of choice in the administration of punishment for minor offences, so as to preserve the ultimate use of the body while at the same time reinforcing a harsh slave order. Rev.

Allen remembers personally knowing "a few slaves that were beaten to death for one or more of the following offences: Leaving home without a pass, talking back to—'sassing'—a white person, hitting another Negro, fussing, fighting, and rukkussing in the quarters, lying, loitering on their work, or even taking things...."³

Within this slave "world order" two social realities simultaneously worked in tension: the sovereign will freely exerted by the planter class and white aristocracy in juxtaposition to slaves attempting to respond in substantive ways to secure for themselves better life possibilities. The paramount dynamic of the North American slaveocracy is the extent to which sovereign will was fortified and exerted in such a way as to deny another people even minimal levels of civil rights. Not only this, the political authority of the antebellum South saw fit to sanction and legislate the truncation and outright denial of rights. I mark most prominent the sanctioned extraction of rights on the part of sovereign planter class, such as mandating slave illiteracy, and slaves' attempts to gain "book religion" in partial response to such prohibitions. The arbitrary nature of such treatment—in that a slaves' life could randomly be adversely affected by the planter class—in conjunction with the extent to which slave owners were free to employ inhumane reinforcement tactics without regard to retribution or legal ramification—such as brutal beatings or lynchings—is the subject at hand governing part one of this dissertation.

³Ibid., 14-15.
Framing the Setting

The basic denial of realized humanity was revealed in various forms, illuminating the unique nature of what is understood in this work as the social placement of the black body (a point that will made clearer in chapter 2). I mark a sequence of social happenings as central underpinnings for creating this social placement: (1) the marking of race as distinct in depreciatory ways; (2) the peddling of black flesh; (3) the implicit and sanctioned denial of rights; and (4) arbitrary killing and maiming in order to reinforce slave order. While I will take up the issue of the particular process of marking race in chapter two, it is important at this juncture to note that within the social placement of the black body the effort to project race in negatively and pejoratively charged ways becomes and continually fuels the basic structure of the historical and religious understanding antebellum blacks.

The “Chatteling” of Black Bodies

The initial process of establishing a social structure wherein the limiting of black freedoms and rights became normative began early in the slave experience with the buying, bartering, and selling of black flesh by way of auctions. Historian Walter Johnson proffers a broadened scope for understanding the significance of the auction block. He casts his study as “the story of the making of the antebellum South.”

Understood broadly, this “story” offers not only a unique perspective of life (for the slaves) within the pens, but also reflects the general realities governing social structure of

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the day: the master/slave hierarchical relationship. The slave trade did not begin nor end in the same place for traders, buyers, and slaves.\(^5\)

Religious studies scholar Anthony Pinn has given critical attention to the slave auction and its connection to the construction of black identity in the United States. Pinn asserts that slave auctions best enforce slave status as dehumanized and mark the moment when the slave most completely feels his or her status as nonbeing.\(^6\) Perhaps the most salient item to note here is the process of destructing (and deconstructing) resident identity with its cultural, religious, and social norms and customs for the purpose of replacing or reconstructing identity anew. It is, as Pinn maintains, the identity forged through these activities that reinforces or gives labor-based consequences to the seasoning period\(^7\)—that period of cultural and physical readjusting in the process of making the African into subject and slave.

This “new” identity is formulated, and reformulate, as it were, for effective service to the planter class. In Pinn’s words: “the enslaved African no longer makes history but is the raw material others use to shape history. This is more than an historical dislocation or displacement; it is the very definition of the enslaved African as object, while on the other hand, it affirms the superior status of whites.”\(^8\) Such a stripping of intrinsic identity—that identity establish within certain cultural settings, according to particular customs—makes certain that one’s understanding of blackness in the United States is inextricably tied to what has been refashioned and presented as historical reality.

\(^5\) Ibid., 14.
\(^7\) Ibid.
\(^8\) Ibid., 47.
by others. Such an arrangement makes uncovering black religious history a challenge, if not problematic, in that the voices of the objects are affected, if not muted.

The slave auction is the starting point for a clearer understanding of the significance of the social placement of blacks in the antebellum South. The fuller significance of the institutional system of denying social rights and freedoms, in conjunction with the recasting of identity through the peddling of flesh, illuminates the extraordinary nature of this process. While these denials take many forms, I utilize sanctions against slave literacy during the antebellum period as a primary means of illuminating the problem of methodological approaches. For my purposes these prohibitions best reflect the extent of the challenge of identity formation (by slaves) and the later capturing of that identity (by historians and other interpreters).


This myth is tied to an apparent paradox. For him, literacy was mythical because it was considered a basic human right and a tool for productive citizenship and fulfilling lives, yet functional illiteracy in America continued at a high rate, most notably among the poor and lower classes. Although his concern here is not specifically with literacy among southern slaves, this myth, as it were, pervaded the slave community. The difference, of course, is that slaves were largely denied even the opportunity of gaining literacy.

Historical accounts also project an idea that slaves took an active role in attempting to secure their own ontological liberation while yet remaining in plantation

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10 Here I argue that literacy, as did religion, offered the bond person an internal freedom, which cultivated a self worth, that may not have otherwise been obtained. My use of the term ontological,
servitude. The desire to learn to read drove many people of African decent to even place themselves in harms way to learn this elusive art. With regard to acquiring literacy Frederick Douglass offers a determined stance. Speaking of an experience after his master halted his initial book instruction, Douglass states:

Filled with the determination to learn to read at any cost, I hit upon many expedients to accomplish that much desired end. The plan which I mainly adopted, and the one which was the most successful, was that of using as teachers my young white playmates, with whom I met on the streets. I used almost constantly to carry a copy of Webster's spelling-book in my pocket, and when sent on errands, or when play-time was allowed me, I would step aside with my young friends to take a lesson in spelling.  

This disclosure offers an example of a resolve culminating in a process that, while not ideal, expresses the extent of some slaves' desire to learn to read.

As more slaves converted to "book religion,"(*) they increasingly desired to read the biblical text. Literacy, for the slave, took on a mythical appeal given the seemingly mysterious power associated with having this skill. The Bible and other mythical texts seemed to bestow power to those with the ability to read the words therein. In fact, their recognition of the significance of literacy led them to consider books in general as having magical qualities.  

Consider, for example, the account of former slave James Gronniosaw as he recounts his master's reading the spiritual texts like the Bible, which bears out this supernatural fascination:

My master used to read prayers in public to the ship's crew every Sabbath day; and when I first saw him read, I was never so surprised in my life, as when I saw the book talk to my master, for I thought it did, as I observed him to look upon it, and move his lips. I wished it would do so with me.

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(*) Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (New York: Pathway Press, 1941), 93.

12 Janet Duitsman Cornelius, "When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 16.
As soon as my master had done reading, I followed him to the place where he put the book, being mightily delighted with it, and when nobody saw me, I opened it, and put my ear down close upon it, in great hope that it would say something to me.¹³ (Emphasis added)

As seen here, the “voice” of the text takes on significant meaning in that it conjures a desire for its perceived magical mythical power.

Added to the magical significance, according to theologian Dwight N. Hopkins, enslaved African Americans seized the written word as sacred word power in order to gain literacy for reading and interpreting the Bible.¹⁴ Put another way, for many enslaved blacks, there was also a sacred religious component to literacy. Literacy facilitated the means toward that transformative end. Stated succinctly, for the slave book learning and reading was a path to God.¹⁵ Hence, for some slaves, a strong connection between literacy and religion existed.

Harriet Ware highlighted the connection between literacy and religion in 1862 when she observed a funeral involving some former slaves. Ware, a white missionary, was astonished at the ceremonial contributions of her black pupils at the burial site. She states, “As we drew near the grave we heard all the children singing their A, B, C, through and through again, as they stood waiting round the grave... Each child had his school-book or picture-book... in his hand—another proof that they consider their lessons as some sort of religious exercise.”¹⁶ For Ware, the profundity of the slaves’ desire for learning impressed upon her the importance of her work and how, partly through her labor, the destiny of a people may be changed. She saw, then, her work as

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¹³ James Gronniosaw, A Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars in the Life of James Albert Ukawsaw Groniosaw (Bath, 1770), 16.
¹⁴ Dwight N. Hopkins, Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 120.
¹⁵ Cornelius, “When I Can Read My Title Clear,” 17.
substantively contributing to the future language, ideals, and hopes of a “little nation of people.”

According to religious historian Albert Raboteau many missionaries were impressed by the slaves’ “superstitious” regard for schooling and amazed at the sacrifices they were willing to make to obtain book learning despite the poverty, uncertainty, and precariousness of their lives.\(^{17}\) There was, for the slave, an elevation of the primacy of learning to read and for religious activity. In effect, learning to read and write gave concrete meaning to the notion of freedom and enabled them to test its actual extent.\(^{18}\) Of course, this posed a monumental struggle, as the testing ground for this endeavor to read was an overwhelmingly oppressive and well-fortified slave system. For the enslaved, learning to read and write seemed to guarantee an uncommon life experience, one that would guarantee power and social status of unknown proportions. Former slave Thomas Jones, who was ultimately successful in gaining literacy, reveals such an idea as he reflects on his personal steadfastness, “It seemed to me that if I could learn to read and write, this learning might—nay, I really thought it would, point out to me the way to freedom, influence, and real, secure happiness.”\(^{19}\) Belief in the inherent supernatural power of certain books, letters, and written materials may have intensified when literacy acquired a near sacred significance for African Americans in the post-Emancipation era.\(^{20}\)

This fervor for literacy on the part of slaves encourages us to consider the truly oppositional practices employed by the sovereign planter class to maintain illiteracy


\(^{18}\) Ibid.


among those enslaved. For example, in Alabama the law of 1832 provided that, "any person or persons that shall attempt to teach any free person of color, or slave, to spell, read, or write, shall upon conviction thereof by indictment, be fined in a sum of not less than $250, not more than $500."\textsuperscript{21} Georgia and Florida passed similar laws. Financial penalties such as these would logically have been effective deterrents to slave instruction, as these dollar amounts represented significant sums during the antebellum period. It should therefore be noted that these laws often served as effective deterrents to teaching slaves to read. Even if no legal statute was in place to prohibit educating slaves, other sanctions existed to insure those types of prohibitions persisted. For example, in Arkansas, although there was no law specifically prohibiting the teaching of persons of African descent, the law of 1838 forbade any white person or free Negro from being found in the company of slaves or in any unlawful meeting, under severe penalty for each offense.\textsuperscript{22} Likewise, in 1863 the state of Delaware, also without legal statutes in place, forbade all meetings of blacks (even whites with blacks) except for religious purposes and the burial of the dead. Additionally, C.H. Hall, a slave in Maryland, recounted that, "It was a rule in that country, that a slave must not be seen with a book of any kind."\textsuperscript{23} This type of inhibitor reveals the extremity of the commands, whether legal or not, to maintain an illiterate slave community.

As previously mentioned, the slaves saw through literacy the opportunity for social advancement. Adding this idea is the religious nature of the quest for literacy. As Gronniosaw and Harriet Ware reveals, a supernatural and superstitious mystique

\textsuperscript{22} Miller, \textit{Race Adjustment}, 247.
surrounded the mystery of the ability to read. White prohibition of the slaves' advancement also reveals an unspoken/covert (and often overt) statement against blacks being able to build social capital in any way, which would have aided in their social advancement. What this section has attempted to reveal is the extent of the far-reaching efforts to prohibit literacy among early African Americans. The basis of offering this historical backdrop is to argue that this form of social and cultural "silencing" and recasting made the task of fully telling their own stories virtually impossible. Further, this quest/prohibition dichotomy also contributes to the difficulty associated with investigating their religious history and experiences. The basis of our historical challenge resides within this challenge.

A Christian Religious Purview and the Historical Challenge

The issue of the silence that results from a largely illiterate slave pool and signification with respect to the African American experience is a pivotal concern for our current efforts. The affects of what may appropriately be considered systematized silencing thus becomes the *dual-pronged challenge* of intra-identity formation on the one hand, and on the other hand, the challenge of uncovering that identity by interpreters seeking to understand the nature of the existence of a people in a previous time and space. That is to say, how can one effectively gain a historical understanding of a people when they themselves were silenced in ways that meant those with authority over them largely constructed the very structure of the identity they attempted to project? As such, projections of "who" they were and are, in many instances, become the stuff of negative stereotypes and truncated representations of humanity.
Charles Long offers a usable framework for understanding the function of religion as he considers the human enterprise to construct identity. Offering an explanation of what it means to be human, he presents religion as a primary tool through which one’s humanity is revealed at its nucleus. His concern is with human consciousness in [relation to] history. Long argues that religion offers one a sense of orientation in the ultimate sense—that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world.  

Religion is illuminated within the collective experiences of a given community. The resulting orientation is “unearthed” within a juxtaposition between being signified by another and finding one’s own significance through religion, which, in turn, works to effectively dispel hegemonic or contradictory significations and language use that confuses meaning and confines a group as subjugated. As one might uncover, this process constitutes a subordinate relationship of the signified vis-à-vis those backed by the power of social custom and political clout. Within this religious landscape the construction of new identity becomes a fundamental task. Accordingly, religion encompasses a wide array of identity forming categories and faculties. According to Long, the religion of any people is thus more than a structure of thought; it is experience, expression, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms.

Long presents an idea of signification, which can be seen three ways. First, the oppressor signifies upon the oppressed—in such an instance the signifier constructs meaning for the signified; second, borrowing from Ferdinand de Saussure, the

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary\textsuperscript{27}—which instills a certain sense of terror and dread within the signified, given that they may be oppressively signified upon without warning; and third, the signified may ultimately become a signifier—countering oppressive significations. Yet, the fact that signification represented an arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified meant that the relationship could be changed.\textsuperscript{28} But since according to Long “all is not signification,” religious symbols and signs must be investigated to capture deployed meanings when the signification process is obscurative in nature. I consider this backdrop a material key to understanding a sense of the utility of religion and its power to forge identity. This seemingly dialectical arrangement is most helpful in moving from opacity to a real sense of utility and from mere utility to the transformation of identity.

So what is the nature of the religious thing or community being considered? The challenge of history and the religious lives of African Americans is daunting. Black historical Christian discourse and an antebellum social setting that denied literacy and thus the reading of the Bible makes more complex our task of unearthing language and culture that frames for us “what really happened.” Such a challenge calls for an assessment of multiple sources, including non-written ones. Accordingly, while I am indebted to Long, this study begins to distance itself by connecting the opaque sign and symbol to a representative symbol of black religion while simultaneously unearthing the mechanisms employed to construct that symbol. These mechanisms, as we will see, reveal an understanding of the nature of black religion. This analysis will posit the nature and an overriding theme of black religion through an idea of healing. Healing best

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{28} Long, Significations, 2.
functions as a trope for understanding black religious experience and is pervasive within
the very symbols that are both projected and fortify the community in the face of dire
oppression.

Some black theologians have promoted historical African American Christian
discourse as primary source material for understanding black religious experience. In
addition, many black theologians have attempted to uncover meaning and religious
identity by way of an intra-analysis of the African American religious self (in general).
Yet the problem is that they are historically and socially placed in the position of
interpreter of those previous religious lives, not sharers of the slaves' religious
experience. In other words, they have often too swiftly socially placed themselves within
the experiential context of the religious lives of slaves so as to speak from among a
people who lived long before. Liberation language associated with the Christ Event—the
death, burial, and victorious resurrection of Jesus Christ—has been placed in the
thoughts, intentions, and discourse in the religious lives of antebellum blacks as sign of
early forms of black theological thought. I argue that this idea is problematic in that it
fails to capture the more complex array of religious experiences of the slaves.
Christianity is but one among these religious experiences and cannot in itself reveal the
useful meta-symbol of healing and identity this dissertation will ultimately promote.
More than this, Christianity is itself complex, practiced in several forms, which may not
be consistent with evangelical formulations.

Ultimately the challenge of uncovering the religious identity by those attempting
to make sense of the historical experiences of a people or community with truncated or
outright silenced voices is a tricky undertaking but a necessary one. Accordingly, that
which brings to mind issues to history and witness are also worthy points of entry into the fray. Language, whether spoken or written, as well as unuttered cultural expressions are all useable. Philosopher of religion Eddie Glaude, Jr. is correct in stating that religious language has been a critical resource in the construction of black identity. At significant issue with respect to our current concern is the casting of history. Thus, the reader will notice this work’s underlying concern with the obfuscatory line between religious language and a historical understanding of self identity, notably among those engaged in black Christian and theological discourse and praxis. Exhibiting such a concern regarding the liberation motif within black theology Glaude surmises that

Too often our views about black identity stem from assumptions about common historical experiences and shared vocabularies that fix out frames of reference without regard to the shifts and changes that make up our actual lives.... But identities are more complicated than this sort of account suggests.... Identity is less about essence and more about the consequence of human interaction: the product of our beliefs, choices, and actions as we engage the world.30

To be sure religious imagination is charged by socio-political and historical experience.

The issue for Glaude, which is also critical for this dissertation, is whether one's religious belief produces a particular type of charged conception of identity and history.

Narrowing the focus to black Christian theological discourse, corporate liberation ushered in and guaranteed by the Christ Event governs communal identity and thought in such a way that it supplants a more complex arrangement of history. For Glaude a pragmatist move, which draws from the past but does so without blind deference while questioning authority, unearths the most potent opportunities for understanding the nuances of African American history. While faith and religious praxis exist within

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29 Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 66.
30 Glaude, In a Shade of Blue, 67.
Glaude's analytical framework, religious language and historical framing are questioned in such a way as to almost completely remove them from the discussion of identity formation. Religion's significance is replaced with decidedly philosophical considerations.

While this dissertation will not follow Glaude's pragmatic turn in addressing this issue of history and identity, one will find structural intersection and shared concern. This study advances a hermeneutical/interpretive engagement particularly with regard to black religion as a principle function for responding to black suffering. In conjunction with Glaude's pragmatist critique of religious language as history, I also seek a further muddling of the black religious landscape to remove fixed understandings of the nature of religious practice among African Americans.

Within this engagement, this work augments black theology's theodical/liberation claims by asserting that, at its core, black religion encompasses a religious praxis that actively reformulates biblical stories and themes in ways that both engenders hope and restores one's sense of belonging to the human family. Such activity forms the groundwork for the viability of black theology's claims but does not trap it solely within a liberation ethos. In short, while liberation, and indeed manumission, is a prominent theme for the enslaved, it ought not dominate the analysis to the detriment of unearthing a more complex array of everyday religious life activities. This work calls upon black theology to take a broader look at history and attempt to embrace or at least make use of details that may not easily fit within its defined theological model. If then, we cannot limit our analysis to a singular liberative perspective how best do we open the interpretive doors?
This chapter considers the way this maltreatment plays a role in our understanding of black religious history and thought. Accordingly, it gives attention to perceptions and interpretive constructions of the religious history of African Americans through methodological considerations. That is, it attempts to set a basis for grappling with what has been constructed and offered by historians, theologians, and theorists as a religious history of African American slaves and attempts for my purposes an effective way to analyze experiences, given their complexity and messiness. My efforts will be to uncover the nature of these religious experiences (including affects of and responses to maltreatment) by way of a hermeneutical method. The goal of this form of engagement is to draw an understanding of the nature of practiced religion from their experiences as slaves. Thus, multiple sources finding origins outside of a strict theological construct will work as complex partners with those ones with a decidedly Christian core. In the end this chapter, utilizing a hermeneutical method, advances an idea that the meaning of a people and their experiences, to the extent it can be uncovered, is tied to a complex mingling of unfixed contextual arrangements. Yet, even with the complexity of religious orientations, these arrangements may be considered “fixed” when driven by a central shared idea—in this case that central idea becomes an underlying norm of human freedom and dignity.

**Hermeneutics as a Viable Methodological Response to the Historical Challenge**

*Hermeneutical Theorists*

This dissertation employs the method of hermeneutics as a viable way of
uncovering meaning and experience in the black religious experiential context. I want to start by outlining some potential quandaries associated with hermeneutics.

Rudolf Bultmann considers the ways one might successfully (a term I would use loosely here) navigate, as it were, troubling interpretive waters. His conclusion is that the interpreter's presuppositions are in fact direct connectors to a previous living relationship with the subject. Accordingly, the interpreter approaches the material with similar concerns as the original subject. In short, every interpretation is necessarily sustained by a certain prior understanding of the subject, which lies under discussion or in question.\textsuperscript{31} The interpretive succession thus includes common interest, which influences the nature of the inquiry and direction of the investigation. The object of interpretation can be established by mutual interest in history as the sphere of life in which human existence moves, wherein reflection upon which offers the possibility of understanding.\textsuperscript{32} But is common interest sufficient for an investigation that entails an extraction of raw data of questionable origin?

Close attention must be paid to the experiences of those being investigated. Informed by Heidegger's line of argumentation—that experience is the key element to hermeneutics of being in general—Hans-Georg Gadamer seeks to advance this hermeneutical analysis by offering a more structured methodology.\textsuperscript{33} Essential to

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 253.
\textsuperscript{33} Heidegger's contribution to Gadamer's hermeneutical project should not be understated. In the 20th century, Heidegger's philosophical hermeneutics shifted the focus from interpretation to existential understanding, which was treated more as a direct, non-mediated, thus in a sense more authentic way of being in the world than simply as a way of knowing. Heidegger's project in \textit{Being and Time} is, in large part, a quest for a fundamental ontology. With regard to a hermeneutical engagement, he requires a method that disclosed \textit{life in terms of itself}. For him, what we understand, that is, what we are able to apprehend about being and life in general comes by way of an analysis of what he terms \textit{Dasein}—literally, being there. This state of Dasein is but a mode of Being in general, among other entities (i.e., inanimate objects like chairs or tables). What gives Dasein its unique differentiating, almost essential, quality among other
understanding Gadamer's hermeneutics is his positing of dialectical hermeneutics. The principle categories of this hermeneutical theory are participation, experience, and the dialectic. Again, shared experience in the investigative process, as we have seen with Bultmann, captures our attention. Ultimately, however, understanding is accomplished, to the extent it can be, through the transmission of historical facts and shared or similar experiences of the "thing" and interpreter. This transmission is the important distinction and fruit of the exchange between past and present. This study approaches antebellum slaves whose ability to speak for themselves was adversely affected.

I conceive that our first level approach to initial interaction of the interpreted thing is based not on empty consciousness temporarily filled with the present situation, rather, it's based on a preunderstanding of the thing, a shared experience. But how do we translate this into an understanding of the religious experience of antebellum slaves? Gadamer would encourage us that no pure seeing or understanding of history exists without reference to the present—history is always seen through a consciousness standing in the present. Yet, one's present conceptions is seen and understood only through intentions, ways of seeing, and preconceptions given by the past. Thus the nature of this dialectical hermeneutics is based upon exchange between the interpreter and the thing being interpreted. Understanding achieves full potentiality only when the

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entities is its ability to conceive of Being in general and its own Being in particular (vis-à-vis the world). His hermeneutical project attempts a phenomenological analysis to find a general understanding of meaning within time (temporality) and space (world/experience). In this way, Being discloses itself through lived experience. Key to Heidegger's concept of interpretation is that when we encounter something "within-the-world" that thing ALREADY HAS an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world in general—sort of a relationship with the thing being interpreted based upon one's own world experience. This involvement (with the thing being interpreted) gets laid out in interpretation. Thus, in every case interpretation is grounded in something we see in advance—in a fore-sight. Accordingly, no interpretations are without presupposition. See Martin Heidegger, Being and Time (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) and Pathmarks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
fore-meanings that it uses are not arbitrary. The aim, it seems, is for some level of precision on the interpreter's part. Thus it is correct for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning at once available to him, but rather to examine explicitly the legitimacy (origin and validity) of the fore-meanings present within him.

If a common interest in the subject governs the nature of our investigation how do we guard against the potential pitfall of revisionist history or recasting the story in our own terms? I am in ideological agreement with philosopher Stanly Rosen that in some instances hermeneutic is a political engagement. In this way, the interpreter runs the risk of the very arbitrary signifying Long mentions. That is to say, hermeneutics is the character obsession of postmodernism and is intrinsically political in nature. As a political beast, hermeneutics decadently posits theory as interpretation. Politics is at once an illusion and an instrument of domination. Thus, it moves too swiftly, whether or not purposefully, past the merit of the historical moment itself by offering a theory of that historical moment while claiming an interpretation. In so doing, it renames the historical moment. This renaming could be considered revisionist history.

In reality we are studying a people, a community, that has been signified upon and thus what we face is an interpretive task affected, if adversely, by that signifying process. Thus, even if we approach the data with a certain ideological eye fixed on what we have perceived upon entry by way of presuppositions, what if a void exists where we might have normally found reliable discourse? How do we truly bring to life those voices who

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35 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 90.
came before for an understanding of religious experience? Even as we approach primary sources such as slave narratives, WPA interviews, and slave autobiographies, the issue of religious experience, one that would encompasses the fullest array of possible meanings, signals us to consider anew what is appropriate and representative. Our challenge shall be to wrestle with the problem of slave “double talk” as presented to interviewers as well as the relative scant primary source material as written by slaves themselves (given the problem of illiteracy as we have discussed).

Pondering multi-deployed forms of language while attempting to capture the meaning of a people becomes a central task within this project. Given the ample possible deployments of meaning for antebellum slaves, the text (with the limited supply of primary sources) and the spoken (given the limitations of captured verbal historical moments) may not be sufficient as the only ways of assessing the historical data. Accordingly, I not only assess the text and verbal expression for signs but also draw from actions (as recorded in history). We have seen that understanding a text involves the fusing of the conceptual schemes of author and interpreter. Our paramount issue centers on the question of whether experience is fundamentally dialectical—exchange marked by its potentially oppositional nature. Philosopher and critical/cultural theorist Paul Ricoeur conversely expresses the possibility that language is inherently dialogical—a non-oppositional sharing or exchange of ideas and experience or conversation, which, in the end works toward some sort of resolution.

Relying on Ricoeur's analysis of the parallels between actions and texts, I argue that an understanding of the process of textual interpretation can be applied to the analysis of social action. Furthermore, an analysis of social action may transcend the
dichotomy between dialectical approaches. For example, this query will employ critical analytic techniques as a way of getting from a naïve reading to a deep reading of a text, and beyond that to a moment of final (individual or communal) appropriation as expressed in the final discourse of interpretation.

The phenomena unearthed here may not be able to be explained fully. Our concern will lead us to push for an interpretation of the language (as reflected in being generally) that results from a curative motif (this issue will be taken up in full in part two) found within religious praxis and general modes of activity. If we assume a hermeneutical formulation—namely that religious experience comes to language through specific modes of discourse\(^{38}\)—we can consider the written historical data on hand for an interpretation of the function of religion for enslaved blacks.

We are faced with a problem before proceeding—the problem of assessing written historical texts as primary data to construct a hermeneutic whose potency is most seen within the context of speaking. I am most concerned with the spoken word but, in certain cases, written accounts of what was uttered must be used. Also, in some cases I will need to make use of written forms of declarative expression as first order communication, which may then be read or expressed aloud and for audible consumption. Ricoeur considers both text and speech as being on the same side of language. Yet, he acknowledges that “in spite of the fact that writing is on the same side as speech in relation to language—namely, on the side of discourse—the specificity of writing in relation to speech is based on structural features which can be treated as analogues of

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language in discourse.  

Ricoeur articulates the spoken as metaphor. Accordingly our initial task of hermeneutics is one finding common ground for the theory of the text and the theory of the metaphor. This common ground is found in discourse. Though fleeting, discourse, in turn, is realized as event (historical) but understood as meaning. Thus meaning may be attained whether in written or spoken form.

Our exposure to possible commonalities now means we are not required to privilege the written over the metaphor or vise versa. But what of the actual move from a textual unit to an action? Ricoeur advances a serviceable mediation of language to assist us with this conundrum. First, language—as opposed to the written text or metaphor—is the primary condition of all human experience. This initial consideration grounds us in a way that allows our gaze to be fixed on the outcome of what is communicated rather than the type of communication. It also requires a push to identify meaning as a primary focus of activity.

Language functions as a primary condition of human experience. With this ideal firmly in tow we are poised to utilize mediation activity as it relates to signs that are identifiable through experience. In addition, we may consider it necessary to identify the

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40 “Metaphor” in the sense of a verbal event—a verbal “thing” of some sort. It is a structure composed of many elements. Ricoeur argues that there is a linguistic imagination that “generates and regenerates meaning through the living power of metaphoricity.” For him, fresh metaphors, which are metaphors that have not been reduced to the commonplace, reveal a new way of seeing their referents. They transform language. They have cognitive importance. To become aware of the metaphorical resources resident in language is to see that in spite of the many rules governing language usage, it is always able to be used to inventively produce new meanings. See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*. Trans. Robert Czerny. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977).

41 Ibid., 166.

42 Ibid., 167.

symbols growing out of the signs. Stated differently, we can attempt to pinpoint those expressions carrying a double sense which traditional cultures have grafted onto the naming of elements of the cosmos. In the case of religious symbols, Long contends that

Through religious symbolism we may find a new and authentic basis for reflection. Reflection proceeding from religious symbolism has the merit of correlating the interpreter on a search for inner being of self and humanity with a level of historical expression commensurate with this intention. As the interpreter moves from symbolism to rationality, another movement will become necessary—a movement back into the shadows of one's ego and history—for the interpreter will discover that one's being is mirrored in the reality of life and history and simultaneously created in the moment of interpretation.

Symbols—such as particular rituals or cultural expressions—may initially be nonsensical because they may be historically fixed and exhibit meanings that fail to connect to traditions familiar to the investigator. However, in this case, hermeneutics aims at demystifying symbolism by unmasking the unavowed forces that are concealed within it or, conversely, it aims at re-collecting meaning in its richest, most spiritual, and most diverse sense. This process, in turn, grants a basis for reflection on the meaning of the symbols. So, advancing from Long, we will attempt to offer a concrete "naming" of black religious phenomena as observed within the context of community. Our efforts will reveal a black religious "coat of arms" and ultimately a guiding religious activity that both reveals the norm associated with this coat of arms and also reinforces it.

The above considerations better position us to approach the text. On this point Ricoeur asserts that

[A]t first sight this mediation [of texts] seems more limited than the mediation by signs and by symbols, which can be simply oral and even nonverbal. Mediation of texts seems to restrict the sphere of interpretation.

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44 Ibid.
45 Long, Significations, 51.
46 Ricoeur, From Text to Action, 17.
to writing and literature to the detriment of oral cultures.... *But what the
definition loses in extension, it gains in intensity. Indeed, writing opens up
new and original resources for discourse.... [W]riting tears itself free of
the limits of face-to-face dialogue and becomes the condition for discourse
itself becoming-text. It is to hermeneutics that falls the task of exploring
the implications of this becoming-text for the work of the interpreter.*

(Emphasis added)

This dynamic as I see it blurs the line between text and metaphor (or, the spoken). As
such, a blurring of the presumed barriers may in the end remove the potentially confining
concerns over whether or not the written text can truly reveal the potency of the spoken
declarative statement. Hermeneutics, beyond the challenges it poses, becomes a critical
tool of the "web of ideology of which it is a thread." It looks beyond concrete historical
fragments of the text in order to experience its possibilities for aspects capable of
transforming the representative community. In this sense, stories are recounted but they
are also *lived in the mode of the imaginary.* Consequently, applying a hermeneutic that
highlights curative sensibilities and themes becomes less difficult and at the same time it
becomes more plausible for understanding the function of black religion, whether the raw
data analyzed is written or spoken.

One might argue for the lack of sufficiency with what fragments of historical
existence remain. Again, our findings must be tested against our two-pronged challenge
of intra-identity formation and formative interpretive approaches to uncover the truth of a
thing or subject. Several theorists have aided this investigation but none have grounded
their work in such a way as to address those who have had to struggle and counter
formulations of their identity so as to render that identity truncated to the common

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47 Ibid.
49 Paul Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," in *On Paul Ricoeur: Narrative and Interpretation*,
observer. In this regard, we push the envelope a bit further in the construction of a hermeneutical method that might cast greater illumination on these voices from within the void—or, that primary space where the mechanisms and process of silencing have safe haven to be freely carried out.

Philosopher of religion Edith Wyschogrod begins a helpful dialogue with the voiceless in an attempt to bring their "true" stories to light within history. She introduces what she calls the "heterological historian" as a representative model for interpreting religious communities. As defined this heterological historian is one who is driven by the eros for the dead and the urgency of ethics, and who speaks from out of the cataclysm that she cannot name. Acknowledging the philosophical impossibility of truly recovering "what really happened," she nevertheless requires a moral imperative to speak for those who have been rendered voiceless because they were literally silenced: colonized, enslaved, imprisoned, tortured, raped, and, most importantly, mass murdered. She calls them the "nameless others," victims of the modern genocides. This figure is thus bound by a responsibility toward the dead to give them a voice. The heterological historian's commitment to them is an ethical one. I assume such a posture in assessing black religious experience.

The heterological historian's labor necessitates a breaking or breach of the unnameability of the unknown void, referred to as the "cataclysm." The essential element the overriding task is one of preservation. As these nameless others are silenced,

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50 Edith Wyschogrod, An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). This nomenclature designates Dr. Wyschogrod herself as a identifier of the nature of the work she presents in this text. Along this line I maintain her use of the feminine "she" in describing this figure where appropriate.
51 Ibid., xiii.
52 Ibid., 3.
53 Ibid., xiii.
in this case through signifycation, my central task as investigator is to speak for them.

Given such a responsibility, my labor must be careful, indeed ethical, so as not to
misrepresent those voices who were before, silenced or otherwise. As Wyschogrod
conveys the point:

The promise to convey the truth about the past presupposes that the
presentation of that which was is always already implicated in a
prediscursive ethics before it is a conveying of facts. But this space prior
to historical description is one in which signs disappear, of de-signing...
She assumes liability for the other, feels the pressure of an Ethics that is
prior to historical judgment, an Ethics of ethics that is a de-signing prior to
her construal of the historical object… The heterological historian is
driven, on the one hand, by an impassioned necrophilia which would bring
to life the dead others for whom she speaks. On the other hand, as
“objective,” she consciously or otherwise assumes responsibility for a
dispassionate relation to events.54

Driven in such a manner the one called upon to investigate historical data, notably of
those silenced by tragedy or calamity, must account for but not allow presuppositions to
cloud judgment.

This task advances in a manner wherein the interpreter’s work must engage both
sides of a cultural spectrum. Caution should ensue when the historian realizes that, if
meaning cannot be attributed to the historian’s promise, the solvent of criticism can only
further destroy the already frayed affective and juridical bonds that hold contemporary
societies together.55 Stated differently, as an interpreter my investigative practices should
be tempered by an element of diplomacy within my critical engagement. If not, criticism
may regenerate the very cultural and social tensions spawned earlier by the
epistemological fundamentalism that these critical analyses were designed to

54 Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering*, 3.
55 Ibid.
undermine.\textsuperscript{56} As an interpreter who has more than an ephemeral connection to the thing being investigated, I must proceed carefully so as not to negate any voice in endeavoring to bring to the fore a heretofore silenced voice. Paramount for this task is the interpretation of cognition in the form of linguistic signs. Interpretation is key for an assessment of the void, which is only exposed by the event of the mass annihilation of persons within ever more compressed time frames—it is indescribable yet constitutes a unique moment in time.\textsuperscript{57}

\textit{Hermeneutical Method Outlined}

Issues of the dialectic mark my principle hermeneutical concern, but to uncover the essential “germ” of religion (making use of Durkheim’s term) for a given community one must account for its central function within and in relation to that community’s quest to secure a full arsenal of healthy life options. I am concerned with the nominal and subjugated beings that seek for themselves an understanding that first must encounter and counter a constructed meaning.

The dialectic hermeneutical method nestled within these pages fixes itself squarely on the subject level. We explore the phenomena of religion by way of a scientific exploration of signs and symbols that are deployed in such a way that they construct and reveal meaning. Within this process religion reveals itself through a dialectical exchange that maps one’s existence. Religion articulated through discourse and praxis functions as a window through which one’s general being is observable. As a result, religion, connected with one’s experience, offers one a sense of what orients humans to all other forms of life

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, 14.
while simultaneously comporting itself toward a conceptualization of one's own being (Heidegger). This constructed orientation is unearthed within a dialectic between being confined to externally constructed definitions of who they were and finding their own significance through religion. In turn, confused or hegemonic meanings are dispelled. This process is hermeneutical in that it interprets the banter of projected counter meanings between sovereign subjugator and signified subjugated. I argue too that this process is fluid on both sides as opposed to merely being a reactive process to establish identity.

Levels of reality otherwise unavailable to us are made available through this sort of hermeneutical investigation. Religious symbolism forms the basis for reflection of the inherently illusive meaning of being. From this the interpreter the moves back into the deep confines of his own being and self-conception to discover that his being is in reality, to some degree, a mirrored image of the reality of that which he investigates. Being of the thing in relation to this symbiosis, as it were, is thus simultaneously created in that moment of interpretation.

This investigation acknowledges that there may be no exhaustion of possible meanings of being through a religious investigation. Arrested by such an idea continually beckons us to reconsider the potential political elements to the hermeneutical process. Thus we might be enticed by Derrida's assertion that hermeneutics is a mistake, a fruitless labor of searching for an author's intended meaning by way of signs for a slippery truth lurking behind a multitude of shadows. By implication the question becomes how one can even attempt to uncover meaning or a "truth" if the author's intent is the very thing that could possibly point the interpreter toward that meaning. The author's intentions and mode of thought, reflections, and context must be accounted for.

And because this is an undertaking that fails to harness this meaning in the truest sense
(because of the interpreters limitations vis-à-vis the author), then the process may need to be changed. The author's intended meaning is thus a secret.

Philosophical theorist John Caputo invigorates us, however, to redouble our investigative efforts through a "more radical hermeneutics." He encourages an approach toward the Secret by way of a more originary experience of the secret. This hermeneutics signifies a giving up of the goal or desire to find an ultimate truth of intended meaning. We are thus accepting of a consignment to signs and the multiple play of meanings, in the plural.\(^58\) While accounting for the multiplicity of possible meanings Caputo acknowledges that the task is in fact a thorny one in that we have to find our way through and sort out these various meanings. Calling to mind such a thought, this analysis stresses the pre-narrative capacity of what we call life.\(^59\) Thus, a "natural" exchange occurs between contextual poles of what was then and is now, creating space for multiple meaning. In the final analysis, this method is intended to "douse the flames of essentialism" and its claims to be in on the Secret.\(^60\) Keeping essentialism in check allows interpretation to actually take place. While I am in alignment with Caputo with respect to any attempt at objectively seeking a single germ of black religious orientation, there may indeed be a germ or governing norm driven by a desire for freedom and dignity pervasive within the complex array of black religiosity.

In our labor of unpacking reasons why religion transformative and curative for the traditionally oppressed we may conclude that meaning, to the extent it can be uncovered, arises out of mutual interest and historical understanding with the subject at hand.

Inherent risks are associated with this process. At some point I too as an interpreter may

\(^{59}\) Ricoeur, "Life in Quest of Narrative," 27.  
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 3.
have to contend with the problem of renaming the historical moment by constructing a theory and disguising it in interpretation’s clothing, so to speak.

With regard to marginalized communities, the interpreter lacks a full knowledge of the subject because they were literally silenced through colonization, enslavement, or imprisonment, or were tortured, raped, or, most importantly, mass murdered. Thus, I investigate antebellum slaves who, by necessitation of their social positioning, reside in the shadows and have been rendered voiceless. Ultimately uncovering a multiplicity of meanings is not so problematic for it allows for a broader discussion of the complexity of considering what happened in the past. As a result, my perceptions of the religious past of African Americans is no longer fixed on, for example, a normative liberation theological structure as representative of aggregate black religious experience. Accordingly, this work presents a “messier” and more complex articulation of this religious history by making use of a broader array of material, religious or otherwise, and methodological tools associated with investigation. In doing it will draw from an assortment of written texts, autobiographical accounts, interviews, secondhand and witness accounts, physical descriptions, medical records, stories, fables, tales, and ritual styles.

Even where I am faced complex arrangements of social action and religious experience, assessing sign and symbol may in fact reveal a norm that underscores the antebellum slave community. I again fix my gaze on Caputo’s approach toward the Secret of a given thing or subject by way of multitude of experiences where a secret exists. Here the secret represents a central “thing” that reveals the essential nature of that subject in general. So, here we find this matrix: the interpreter, the subject(s) or thing(s)
being interpreted, the interpreters presuppositions and experiences, and what ever is left behind by or about the subject or thing. So, as Caputo and others would have it, I relinquish the desire to find a single defining or ultimate truth about the subject. However, I do argue that this matrix offers fodder for the interpreter to draw from to mark a norm or germ of black religion. Therefore, this work moves beyond definitions of black religion in terms of orientation. Stated differently, the present efforts cease attempts at quantifying who or the extent to which slaves were Christian or something else. Moving past the potentiality of the problems associated with different religious orientations thus frees efforts to hermeneutically find common ground among them. This “common ground,” as it were, connects this multitude of religious experiences to a driving desire for human dignity and freedom in the ultimate sense. As we shall see in chapter 5, this norm functions in particular ways and towards a curative end.

Conclusion

Our time in this chapter has been spent bringing attention to the problem of extreme maltreatment and affects on black religious history and identity formation. From this premise it has advanced ideas with regard to possible ways of effectively interpreting relatively scant sources in order to uncover the nature of African American religious identity during the antebellum South. It offered what I claim as a viable method of attempting to get a picture of what went on in a given time and space: that being hermeneutics. In so doing, we engaged several theorists of hermeneutics who I believe in some way help to fortify the constructive methodological approach governing this project.
Principally, Rudolf Bultmann and Hans-Georg Gadamer have given us vital methods of approaching the data we intend to interpret. Both in their own ways argue that when we approach the material being interpreted we do so with a common and/or shared interest we the subject at hand. In a sense the interpreter's context, with its cultural understandings and social concerns, converges with historical-contextual framework wherein the subject resides. In a dialectical fashion, as Gadamer holds, a constructive "sharing" takes place between these two entities. This form of exchange brings meaning to light that is not one-sided. Accordingly, common interest governs the vary nature of the interpretive discourse. Such a multifaceted deployment of meaning helps to guard against the potential pitfalls of what Stanley Rosen calls "hermeneutics as politics"—or, hermeneutics that posits one's own theory as interpretation.

Paul Ricoeur makes a contribution regarding the possibilities of dialogical language as paramount for uncovering meaning. He navigates between texts and resulting actions, arguing that an investigation of social action (of the subject at hand) may transcend differences that could result from a solely dialectical approach. Ricoeur reveals the messiness of the task as we attempt to grapple with text, ideas, context and culture, the written and the spoken. Ultimately, the spoken projects metaphors. Our initial task of hermeneutics is to find common ground between textual and metaphorical theories. For Ricoeur this common ground is found in discourse, which is realized as and reveals an event in time and space. In the end, language, in whatever form, reveals the primary condition of human experience and points us to signs and symbols that offer context clues to meaning.
Reflecting similarly on projected signs, Charles Long assists this dissertation's approach of attaching religious symbolism to them. Long calls for a movement into deeper depths of ego and history to discover those things residing in the shadows. This coming together of cultures and ideas between the interpreter and subject works to clarity signs and symbols. Edith Wyschogrod supplies a concrete ethical imperative to lurk within the shadows to uncover the voices of those subjects who have been silenced by the cataclysm—that void left when the subject is silenced by various modes of catastrophe. The task of the ethical "heterological historian" essentially becomes one of preservation.

With our investigation of these theorists my task becomes clear, if not compelling. I am attempting to peer into a void that has been affected by the bi-products of institutionalized slavery to find a meaningful nugget of black religious experience. From this labor I will ultimately argue for a distinct nature or essence of black religion originally rooted in the antebellum period. We are thus satisfied for now to recapitulate our task in this initial chapter: to consider effective ways of assessing the two-fold issue of intra-identity and the challenge of uncovering that identity. A phenomenological and hermeneutic formulary has been set out as the way in which this work shall proceed. Our hermeneutical deployment allows us to include various sources for an understanding of black religious phenomena. In so doing we are made more comfortable with the multiplicity of meanings such a hermeneutical approach may likely uncover even as we seek a centralized understanding of the nature of religious life for a given community. The centralization of this complex array of meanings is evident only in cases where a central idea or norm is discovered as a motivating force behind socio-religious action toward human freedom and dignity.
As this chapter has offered the basis for our approach while simultaneously communicating the inherent challenges to the task, chapter 2 will peer deeper into this unsettling void. Its efforts will be to unpack what I term Corporeal Constriction or the coiled prey as evidenced by the social placement of black bodies during the antebellum period. From this basis it will begin to highlight the social arrangements that gave rise to a particular strand of religiosity, that which is termed “black religion.”
Chapter Two

The Social Placement of Antebellum Black Bodies as Corporeal Constriction: The Anti-Beauty Project and Splendor of the Flesh

Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling...

Ephesians 6:5

Between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked...The Christianity of America is a Christianity, of whose votaries it may be truly said, as it was of the ancient scribes and Pharisees, "They bind heavy burdens, and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders, but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. All their works they do for to be seen of men."...They attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of law, judgment, mercy, and faith.¹

—Frederick Douglass

Even dead, these [black] bodies were without sanctuary

—James Allen, Without Sanctuary

For Frederick Douglass slaveholding Christianity, at best, resembled religion in outwardly exhibited forms. At its core, however, slaveholding Christianity, dormant with respect to divine qualities of grace and love, promoted the “letter of law,” which fundamentally called for black obedience and servitude. In response (as we will discuss in chapter five), many slaves, often putting their lives on the line, began searching the Scriptures for themselves to seek an alternative view of God.² To the African American slave, Jesus Christ became a beacon of transformative hope, not just eschatologically, but also for life management through dire circumstances on earth. However, our current concern centers on the journey that brought this people of lowly state to such a transformed religious position. Accordingly, the excavation of a Jesus who seemed to identify with the despised and disenfranchised begets the central question governing this second chapter: what is the historical and socio-cultural backdrop to a distinctive black religiosity in the United States?

This chapter thus unpacks the problem noted in chapter one—the attempt to uncover usable historical fragments of a people strategically silenced, whose history has been written by others, and whose existence has been pressed in many painful ways. Here, we examine the origins of African American religious experience in the face of racial oppression and physical suffering. Stated a different way, this chapter affixes its fuller attention on the social reality that fostered a distinct religious outlook by emphasizing the nature of slave existence during the antebellum period. By way of

² Elsewhere I argue that African and African American slaves sought, through literacy, a curative tool equipping them to respond to dehumanization and, when connected to religious sensibilities, full spiritual and/or ontological personhood in the hopes of overcoming their oppressive social conditions. See, "When I Saw the Book Talk to My Master:” The Religious and Curative Elements of Literacy for the Antebellum Slave Community (submitted as a final research paper, fall 2004, Rice University, to Dr. John B. Boles). See also, Janet Duitsman Cornelius, "When I Can Read My Title Clear": Literacy, Slavery, and Religion in the Antebellum South (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).
inquiry, it harmonizes three distinct ideas for a conceptualization of this unique social reality—the genesis of black religious experience, the social reality of antebellum black existence, and the social placement of the black body. These ideas coalesce within this investigation in the following way: I offer a social analysis of what I consider "pre-religious" experience, which forms the basis for my theory of black religion unearthed in chapter five. In addition, the body becomes a source for discussion within the larger framework of my theory of the general antebellum black experience. I give attention to the body, more specifically the antebellum black body, because through this embodied experience we come to understand this body as a material locus of identity and as the site of collective symbolization, whether this symbolization is imposed by whites or, as I show in chapter four, recast by black in ways more acceptable to them. Thus, the imposed symbolization of the black body takes up our time here. To this end, the religious and social symbolism surrounding the nature of black bodies in light of slave auctions, chattel slavery, sanctioned arbitrary maiming and killings, and lynchings become a prominent precursor for understanding the social structure of black religion.

Our current assignment initially takes us through several historical “snapshots” of antebellum black experience. In briefly laying out the nature of their historical reality, we next move toward a socio-historical analysis of “social placement.” Social placement ideology is best understood as the social framing of sanctioned bodily abuse within a given historical reality. In this sense, we will attempt to tease out an idea regarding the significance of antebellum black bodily treatment and function.

Chapter two thus puts forth an idea of the social placement of black bodies codified through the shorthand phrase corporeally constrictions—that is, the social results
of the way in which black bodies were treated and utilized in accordance with "the order of the day" during the antebellum period. In short we assess the "ordering" of the various movements and social happenings of these bodies at the behest of the planter and slaveholding classes during the antebellum period. The physical manifestations of the corporeal constriction here described take the form of what I decree as the coiled prey—that is, the literal material affects of corporeally constricted beings confined, crushed, and even choked by those with sovereign authority over them. These antebellum black bodies, living and abiding as the coiled prey of society, experience levels of socio-political constriction and pressure that ultimately define not only the way they are characterized or represented, but also how they feel and experience life.

This analysis is dually construed: first from the perspective of metaphorical projections of black bodies with regard to worth, viability, and aesthetics. On this level our query assesses the often unspoken declarations about these bodies—those ideas and sentiments emanating from what has been said about them for public consumption. Secondly, we consider the material manifestations of confinement on these bodies in light of the metaphorical projections that illustrate them. That is, we take seriously the lived experience of corporeal constriction through sociological analysis of the body.

An Anti-Black Racial Rationale – The Backdrop to Corporeal Constriction

French psychological and race theorist Frantz Fanon sets off his important discussion regarding the fact and significance of blackness with the following phrase:
"Dirty nigger!" Or simply, 'Look, a Negro.'Interestingly, a child uttered the latter statement. What, we might inquire, was embedded within the psychosis of this child regarding a black body that would arouse this above all statements? With regard to the aesthetic and even general perception of a black person, these separate statements may appropriately be considered one and the same. The level of objectification sewn into such statements begins to form the basis of the social placement idea this chapter puts forth. We are thus initially disheveled by the very idea of white supremacy and its modern tendency for racially charged projections of identity.

The visual perception affects both whites and blacks alike. At "Look, a Negro" this black body is at first considered and comprehended before the perceiver recoils. Ultimately, the perception of this black body is offered back to the (black) hearer in a distorted fashion, re-colored, projected as animal or bad or mean or ugly. The onlooker shrieks and trembles because the "Negro" is in fact a "dirty nigger," fortified by all accompanying distorted and racially charged implications. Fanon illustrates the idea behind "Look, a Negro" this way: a handsome little white boy trembles because he is afraid of the nigger, the nigger is shivering (because he is) cold, the handsome little white boy is trembling because he thinks that the nigger is quivering with rage, the handsome

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3 Frantz Fanon’s, *Black Skin, White Masks*, does not, as its principle project, offer an analysis on black religious thought. However, what it does advance is a thorough and critical assessment of the colonized position as sufferer and its collective response to colonization. On the issue of making use of the colonizer’s language Fanon sights that the overriding goal of the colonized in such an arrangement lies beyond a simple desire to grasp the morphology of the language, but it means above all to assume a culture (17). Speaking of blacks of the Antilles Fanon is confronted with the problem of the colonized group becoming “proportionately whiter.” (18) From this notion, he assesses the ways in which the Antilles will come closer to being a real human being in direct connection to their mastery of the French language. Further deploying his argument Fanon states that every colonized people, while grappling with an inferiority complex, comes face-to-face with the language and culture of the civilizing nation and becomes whiter as they renounce their blackness. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 109.

4 Ibid., 113.
little white boy throws himself into his mother's arms: "Mama, the nigger's going to eat me up." Such an illustration for my purposes may also set the tone for a schema of anti-black racism and its impact on the period from which the North American slave system gets its vitality.

Thus, charged perceptions of a black identity are rooted in reinforced ideas of the something less than human nature of black bodies. Drawing from religious scholar Anthony Pinn we frame a two-part process wherein those of African descent became, as he frames it, objects of history. First, as objects, they would be read and understood by many whites more from the perspective of chattel worth than for their capacity as humans of equal social worth. The second phase is tied to the results of the initial contact: slavery. At this level, Europeans, marked by an age of exploitation, perfected racial, psychological, social, and political mechanisms and structures. In order the secure wealth at the lowest cost, this phase was by the goal of securing an institutionalized system of servile domination.

An institutionalized system such as this is held together by a particularly charged racial ideology. If anti-black racial oppression tells us anything, then it reveals how social and political arrangements can be both complex and one-sided. Touting this process as one of "bad faith," philosopher Lewis Gordon holds that anti-black racism potentially wrenches human beings into the most extreme visual metaphors of difference: from the most light to the most dark, from the fullness of color (something) to its

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5 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 114.
7 Ibid.
complete absence (nothing), from "white," that is, to "black." Even though human beings ought not be relegated to these extremes as a testament of worth and value, social structures seem to relegate them so. The core assumption of bad faith is associated with the idea that human beings are aware of their respective freedoms, whether or not their exercising of these freedoms is truncated. Thus, knowing this idea, those who press another group with the purpose of suppressing, stifling, or obliterating their freedoms does so with full knowledge of assumed freedoms "endowed by the Creator" to all humankind. An alteration of such a socio-political order is an act out of bad faith.

The fortification process of anti-black racism forces and reinforces situations where inferiority is not merely assumed from one race to another, but it simply must be so in order for the ship of superiority to stay afloat. This form of anti-black racism exists in bad faith even when one makes use of extrinsic racism to conceal intrinsic commitments. Therefore, one may demand others to provide evidence for their right to exist when all along they assume that the problem with the other's existence is that they simply are not members of their self-justified group. What is more, these evidential differences points to inherent ontological differences, rendering one group superior to another.

Philosopher Cornel West presents a compelling account of the way in which the idea of this type of white supremacy became normative in the West. Ironically, it is through this set of circumstances that the colonial and antebellum African American encounters the modern world. As a result, blacks suffer within a social structure that has produced a "normative gaze," which is an ideal that promotes white values of beauty and

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9 Ibid., 76.
10 Ibid.
culture as superior. This idea was drawn primarily from classical aesthetic values of beauty, proportion, and human form and classical cultural standards of moderation, self-control, and harmony.\(^{11}\) This theory of ideal form was utilized as a way of categorizing and ranking races. Such classificatory categories set the tone for the black-white/subjugated-subject racial order of the day. The captivity of natural history to this "normative gaze" signifies the first stage of the emergence of the idea of white supremacy as an object of modern discourse.\(^{12}\) Philosophical thinkers of that day, who were mostly white, considered Africans as incurring "the penalty of an error, and been branded with thick lips and black skin, whereas "the first man," who was no doubt Caucasian, was white and was more graceful and beautiful.\(^{13}\)

Theories of beauty between the races were promulgated by the most prominent figures during the colonial and antebellum periods, and did much to bolster normative ideas of white aesthetic superiority. Among the most significant of these figures was Thomas Jefferson. In one of the queries from his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson promoted the idea that whites were simple endowed with more appealing physical form, such as flowing hair and a more elegant symmetry of form. Even blacks, he reasoned, noticed and beheld this fact as proof of their own judgment in favor of whites, which is declared by their preference of them (in terms of a desired aesthetic).\(^{14}\) Probing the aesthetic differences (in terms of visual perception) among the races was not simply a point of conjecture for Jefferson or other like-minded of the master/planter class. Rather,


\(^{12}\) West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 55.

\(^{13}\) Alexander Kimmont, *The Natural History of Man and the Rise and Progress of Philosophy* (Cincinnati: U. P. James, 1839), 214.

such assessments were considered paramount for ranking and categorization of races. Jefferson inquires almost rhetorically that, "[t]he circumstances of superior beauty, is thought worthy of attention in the propagation of our horses, dogs, and other domestic animals; why not in that of man?"\textsuperscript{15}

For Jefferson, the aesthetic analysis of the races went beyond comparing color, figure, or hair. Several additional distinctions marked the superior positions of whites. Blacks, he observed, "have less hair on their face and body" and "secrete less by the kidneys and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odor."\textsuperscript{16} In addition, their greater degree of transpiration rendered blacks more tolerant to heat, and less to cold, than whites.\textsuperscript{17} Such ideas strictly posited on aesthetic grounds set the tone for further classification or superior and inferior classes of people. Thus, forming a basis for enslavement, in conjunction with or over and above strict economical concerns, anti-black racism and the setting of normative constructions of beauty and capacity offers fertile soil for a prosperous slave system.

Before unpacking our central theories of this chapter, we will lay out two elements of the historical setting from which our central idea of corporeally constricted black bodies as coiled prey arises. Slavery in North America rested on the principle of property in man—of one man’s appropriation of another’s person as well as of the fruits of his labor.\textsuperscript{18} Justification for a system that would obliterate the previously freedoms, culture, and religion alike, manifested itself in various ways. Perhaps the most paradoxical were biblical justifications and others on theological grounds. The extent to

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Jefferson, \textit{Writings}, 265.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
which white plantation preachers and theologians sought to maintain slave order created a second class Christian citizenry among black slaves. According to historian Winthrop Jordan who accounts for the effects of white Americans to establish superiority over blacks from the standpoint of color and implications of “otherness.” In the initial English encounter with blacks they considered them “human beings,” though very different from whites. Europeans were driven by the notion that whiteness was superior, the perfection of human beauty. The dark African complexion was thought to be caused by the sun and a curse. The dichotomy of America was Americans (whites) and “others” (non-whites), with black as the extreme. Whiteness was sometimes linked to salvation and divine favoritism. Ham’s offense offered as proof of the vile and cursed nature of black skin. The difference between white and black (heathen) religion also confirmed this sentiment. According to Jordan, the issue of heathenism in the eyes of antebellum whites was a fundamental defect setting blacks apart from whites—this too is important because many blacks would later accept this view in arguing for the secondary “benefit” of slavery for blacks. Africans were essentially equated with savages with the lustful disposition of apes. Yet religiously, conversion of the African to Christianity becomes and issue because it assumes the inner sameness of all people. In conjunction with other arguments against slave conversions, many feared that no matter how much conversion benefited the slave’s soul, it may also make them rebellious. What is more, some opponents feared the slaves’ gaining too much intelligence through conversion. Thus, upon conversion, efforts were made to draw a distinction between the slaves’ earthly lot and spiritual status as “equal.” See Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968).

I mark of general importance regarding the issue of the slaves’ “rational” capacity and links to the justification of their adverse use the work of Historian Michael Morrison. He advances the notion that the whites considered it their manifest destiny to inherit North America through a spirit of progress and enterprise, which was gained from the “Almighty.” This line of thought prompted the founding fathers and master class to characterize themselves as superior to other nations and, most importantly, to the blacks many of them enslaved. Southerners responded that slavery promoted equality by mitigating class conflict and ensured liberty by making exploitation of white workers and independent agriculturists unnecessary. Such notions reveal the high level of commodification of black bodies and the extent of the low status blacks held as United States citizens—in that they at best had “fringe” status, or, at worse, no status at all. Juxtaposed against the possible exploitation of white laborers, blacks offered the most viable solution to toiling demands—a relatively inexpensive fully exploitable and largely socially controlled workforce of
destiny, the idea of providence brought forth through white biblical interpretation became a significant issue. Leading up to the Civil War clashes over the meaning of the Bible regarding slavery were matched by an equally sticking division over what the nation’s foremost religious thinkers concluded about the workings of divine providence.\footnote{See Mark A. Noll, \textit{The Civil War as a Theological Crisis} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 4.} What God was providentially doing leading up to, in, and through the war was of great debate and consternation. Of course, as with the debates over the biblical justifications of slavery, interpretations of divine providence differed materially depending on the standpoint of the one who identified how God was at work.\footnote{Ibid., 5.}

Ideas about God’s providential will for slavery were made clear by John Rice in the April 1861 issue of the \textit{Southern Presbyterian Review} when he argued that an understanding of the prominence of the Southern states was based in large measure on the workings of divine providence. Accordingly, he reasoned that “God in His providence has committed [the institution of slavery for]” the “guidance and control” of the South.\footnote{John H. Rice, The Princeton Review on the State of the Country,” in the \textit{Southern Presbyterian Review} 14 (Apr. 1861), 13-33, 40.}

With regard to divine providence, whether abstractly conceived or concretely argued, it rose and fell on the issue of race, that is, the enslavement of a particular race of people over and above another. Historian David Brion Davis speaks to the point this way: “Race [during the antebellum period] had become the favored idiom for interpreting the social effects of enslavement and emancipation and for concealing the economy’s parasitic

bodies without the intellectual capacity to effectively challenge such an arrangement. See Michael A. Morrison, \textit{Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
dependence on an immensely profitable labor system." White theological and biblical thinkers were thusly consumed by ideas of race and the peddling and utility of black flesh.

It should be noted that a certain number of black clergy considered the pedagogical merits of slavery for African Americans. Henry McNeal Turner, who became a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1848, held that God established slavery for a specific function. Though inherently evil, slavery and moral evil in general was a mysterious activity that God utilized for a particular and instructional end. In his words, Turner stated that he did not "believe that American slavery was a divine institution, but" that he did believe "it was a providential institution and that God intends the primal factor in the civilization and Christianization" of blacks in the United States, and eventually those on the continent of Africa. Turner ultimately reasoned that God brought Africans to the United States as slaves for the purposes of learning from Western culture and being introduced to Christianity. We may draw from this that the religious ideas surrounding slavery, among whites and blacks, were complex and messy. What seems clear is that slavery as an institution encouraged logical justifications from both sides as to its merit and ultimate worth.

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The general theological climate among white theologians and ministers during the antebellum period grew within the context of the swell of revivalism during and after the initial Great Awakening. Within American religious thought, revivalism was a rational enterprise. The early United States social structure was broken down in classes, with slaves at the bottom. It was thus established early that different classes and conditions of human society would exist, thus social inequality was thought to be a divine contrivance. As shepherds of the theological dictum of the day, white ministers held a pivotal position for the country, especially in the South, where, during the antebellum period, the swell of pro and anti-slavery fervor called for broad sweeping biblical analysis by qualified clergy and scholars. According to historian E. Brooks Holifield, antebellum clergy nurtured two conflicting images of themselves: One of the preacher as a man embodying the religious sentiments of the common folk and the other of the minister as a gentleman exalted and elevated through character, eruption, and professional status.

Theological thinkers and religious practitioners of the day were mostly men of the town, preachers and professors. Ironically, many of them had only a rudimentary theological knowledge though they were perceived as elite within their communities and in society generally. Their formal theology was an expression of several modes of thought, among them were a general Southern religious thought, the songs of "plain

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27 Revivalism fervor indeed grew among whites and the blacks they enslaved alike. According to religious historian Albert Raboteau the Great Awakening marked the dawning of a new day in the religious history of the United States. Blacks were lifted to great heights of religious excitement. The emotional element within the accompanying revivals drew many early Americans to convert to Christianity, with both races seeking the possible benefits of a relationship with the God of the Bible. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 128-129.


29 Ibid., 24.

30 For an extensive introductory treatise of this idea see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2-15.
folk,” the Spirituals of slaves, and frontier-style preacher sermons. The function of their religious thought was to reassure people that they were reasonable and living in a reasonable world. Christianity was thus advanced as a reasonable religion. This season of American religious growth was thus marked by a move toward all things rational in understanding the function of religion.

Among stalwart pro-slavery ministers, Virginia Baptist preacher Thornton Stringfellow was a widely published promoter of the biblical sanction of African American enslavement. Often conjoining his experience with blacks with his reading of the Bible, Stringfellow imported Scripture for an understanding of experiential context. In his 1861 work entitled Slavery, Its Origin, Nature, and History Considered in the Light of Bible Teachings, Moral Justice, and Political Wisdom, he wrote that the Bible was the supreme authority and legislator on the matter of slavery. The overriding question for Stringfellow was the extent of or outright sanctioning of the enslavement of blacks in particular. He thus sought, in part by way of biblical exegeses, to show their worthiness as appropriate subjects for enslavement. Stringfellow considered those of “the African race” most suitable for “domestic slavery for life” because, as he reasoned through it, “they are not qualified to use political freedom, and because they receive the full due for this [slave] service and labor, and that in a form accommodated to the service they pay for it.” The issue of political qualification will become an important point of discussion later in this chapter but Stringfellow’s use of it brings to mind the central concern at hand even from a biblical/theological perspective. For him, the “African race is constitutionally inferior to the white race. Experience proves this in all the conditions

and countries they have ever occupied.” Accordingly they were unqualified for full political acknowledgment. While Stringfellow’s positions were espoused by a clergyman on biblical grounds, interestingly, their positions also affected public policy.

A specific biblical appropriation marks the antebellum biblical-theological justification of black slavery. With regard to general justifications for slavery, both the Old and New Testaments were authoritative. For white religionists, considered succinctly, the Old Testament reveals the divine authoritative action of God commanding Israel to take servants while in the New Testament they appealed to the pastoral epistles exhorting slaves to obey their masters. The governing root of biblical thought for the white preacher-theologian brought together ideas of the lack of black rational thought with this biblical idea of obeying their masters.

This line of thought took the form of a “doctrine of passions” as drawn of experience in conjunction with biblical interpretation. Accordingly, their ethic supplied a scientific justification for their suspicion of the slaves’ perceived self-impulses leading to a subjection of passions. As a result, a doctrine of passions was used to justify chattel slavery as slaves, unlike their better disciplined masters, were unable to control their passions. In this sense, rational structures of society were grounded in hegemony with a clear line drawn between the intellectual capabilities between the races. But more importantly, these ideas were grounded biblically. Charleston Presbyterian pastor Thomas Smyth and others defended slavery based upon their convictions regarding the nature of sin, arguing for ultimate patriarchy over sinful slaves. Smyth was one from

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among the "moralists" of the day driven by a theological social ethic. Accordingly, they understood slavery as biblically a providentially ordered system of labor and slave preparation for rightful service and godly character.\textsuperscript{34}

The fortification the biblical-theological thrust of slaveholding order depended also on certain "reads" of the Bible that made particular declaration on the social lot of blacks. Notable among these was the so-called Curse of the Ham. Taken from the biblical account in Genesis 9:18-25 wherein Noah declares a curse against the descendants of his son Ham, this short portion of Scripture sparked significant debate and consternation in relation to black identity in the U.S. Indeed, intriguing issues are at play here. For one, putting aside the fact that the curse was placed upon Canaan, not Ham, in response to Ham’s presumed despicable and disrespectful act of seeing his father Noah’s nakedness, connecting this text to blacks during the antebellum period took a bit of hermeneutical twisting.\textsuperscript{35} That issue aside, the reality is this idea of the Curse of Ham was manifested in two important ways: as a particularly socially charged justification and a key element to black identity formation.

Briefly with respect to the latter, this dissertation is concerned in part with the history and historiography of formative structures of black Christianity. Religious history scholar Sylvester Johnson explores what he terms as a "myth" of Ham as an idea contributing to the construction of antebellum black identity as "people of God." Unlike the lion’s share of studies on the topic of Ham, which generally focuses attention on the curse of Ham with regard to racial denigration or as a justification for North American

\textsuperscript{34} Holifield, \textit{The Gentlemen Theologians}, 144-152.

chattel slavery, the resulting formulated religious identity it constructed in the nineteenth-century among African American slaves becomes an important starting point. Though questionable, this myth is dually utilized to in some way justify the position of the enslaved as part of the human family, both biblically and socially. That is to say, the myth of Ham, with all of its unfortunate implications and the many questions surrounding its accuracy as confirmation that God sanctions African and African American slavery, is utilized for the “benefit” of the enslaved.\textsuperscript{36} With regard to our principle concerns this interesting identity formation must be considered in light of the use of the Curse to forge and project an “enslaveable” identity on the part of the antebellum slaveholding class. However, I also mark this idea as one among several viable starting points to forging uniquely black religious Christian identities.

The use of this biblical account for the purposes of justifying slavery was but a small piece of its socially formative power. The Curse also revealed the way in which ideas surrounding its indictment on morals, values, and appropriate behavior became fixed in time and fed antebellum ideas regarding the lowly state of African Americans. Religious studies scholar Stephen Haynes presents a useful critique of its utility to the antebellum planter class along two important lines: regarding issues and the control of black dishonor and disorder.\textsuperscript{37}

Laying out his argument dialectically, Haynes reveals America’s tendency of applying stories from the postdiluvian chapters of Genesis to the problem of race relations (Babel/Nimrod, Noah, Cain). Utilizing Genesis 9 (Noah) as confirmation of


God's establishment of racial types, he argues for antebellum America's preoccupation with the nature of human difference. Add to that the reality of the difference on moral and ethical grounds based upon human dispersion (Gen 10 &11). In so doing, Gen 9, 10, and 11 are cast as a textual unit allowing antebellum interpreters to argue the Nimrod was the grandson of a cursed Ham and, thus, embodied the curse. Such an embodiment was then projected onto African American slaves as morally corrupt and disorderly, confirming their status as justifiably enslaved. These ideas set the stage for Haynes' order/disorder, honor/dishonor dialectic.\(^{38}\)

Ham's actions, which brought about the curse, helped maintain the southern mindset of "Southern Honor," which resonated in their deepest cultural values. White Bible readers saw Ham as violating familial loyalty (most egregious), which marked his African descendents as utterly void of honor and thus fit for slavery.\(^{39}\) In the southern mind, the concept of honor was infused with biblical-religious rhetoric. Thus "Holy Honor," which united planter and preacher in a common perception of the world's order governed not only their pious acts within their communities, but also cast a shadow on their perception of the enslaved as potentially honorable citizens if left to themselves. Ham's dishonor produced shame of all his descendents, making them easy targets for enslavement.\(^{40}\) Given that, by extension, African Americans were also Ham's descendents, it was only prudent to indict them has having such a decayed, if non-existent, moral fabric.

If then the general make-up of the African American was dishonorable, then too their social actions should be probed as potential proof of the lower human status. The

\(^{38}\) Ibid. 
\(^{39}\) Ibid., 67. 
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 84.
emphasis here on disorderly behavior, which exemplified black behavior and moral character and necessitated a preserving of an ideal order in society through the slave system. In this regard, the servitude of Ham’s descendents functions to protect the social order from disorderly conduct and ultimate shame. Ham’s offence included laughter and an odd sort of glee in seeing his father’s nakedness; white biblical interpreters held that laughter was associated with disorderly and mocking behavior. Therefore, when southern slaves laughed it could also be a representation of their mocking, disorderly, rebellious, threatening, and ungovernable behavior.  

A foreboding reality of “God ordained” power and rational superiority was thus expressed through the Christianity of the master class. Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, in assessing what she considers the Platonized form of Christianity promulgated by many African Americans, argues that this form of Christian belief leaves little room for positive considerations of the black body. That is, since, according to Platonized Christianity, the body and soul cannot together exist in any fruitful capacity, the body in general, and the black body in particular, becomes a vessel of sin and is thus antithetical to the nature of God. Blacks, governed by uncontrolled passions and emotions and lacking all but limited capacity toward reason, are forced to adopt a form of Christianity that undermines their very being. As a result they suffer psychologically, emotionally, spiritually, and physically—paradoxically expanding and advancing the misuse of the black body. According to Douglas, many blacks in America have tried in affirming ways to make use of Platonized Christianity emphasizing the sacredness of their bodies by aggressively controlling “ungodly” passions and desires, which they hoped would ultimately offer them spiritual equality with whites. Through a “hermeneutic of

41 Haynes, Noah’s Curse, 94, 96.
appropriation,” the enslaved and suffering black believer attempts to reconfigure their bodies as sacred, affirming their humanity.\(^{42}\) As with the use of the Curse of Ham, they attempt to use master’s tools by emphasizing the paramount importance of keeping the body “in check” so that its aesthetic beauty could be revealed.\(^{43}\) While we take up the notion of slaves utilizing tools for life affirming purposes to a fuller degree in part two of this dissertation, we may now simply identify the extensive ramifications of black inferiority.

*Of An Ethical Imperative to Enslave*

In some ways, an ethical imperative to care for and instruct the slave in matters of civility highlights the master-slave relationship during the antebellum period. Thomas Jefferson makes it clear that, at least from his perspective, the blacks have the best, if not the only, chance for social and cultural polishing through observation and interaction

\(^{42}\) The process of grappling with an imposed identity while simultaneously reconfiguring what has been imposed cannot be underestimated. For the present purposes, historian Michael Gomez’s analysis regarding the affect of the transatlantic movement of African bodies is also useful. He argues that there were specific mechanisms in each phase of the African’s experience—the initial capture and barracoone, transatlantic trek (or Middle Passage), and seasoning—through which the African was continually forced the reassess his identity. Gomez maintains that this process, taken as a whole, both informs identity and inadvertently creates a new collective consciousness among Africans from different tribes, allowing them to effectively cope with their lot in life. Gomez also considers the idea of ethnicity and class in the transformation of Africans to African Americans. Highlighting first the white perceptions of blacks during these periods, Gomez assesses the outgrowth of the African self-perception.

Proffering an understanding of African/African American religion as a complex matrix, Gomez examines the nature of slave religion. He contends that American Christianity is directly responsible for the psychological impairment of many within the African-based community. This “impairment” results from white slaveholders promoting a white Christian god aloft in white splendor with a white heavenly host. Such imagery inherently conveyed a message of disadvantage to the African. Further, their presentation of the “gospel” purported to *biblically* substantiate African enslavement (via the curse of Ham) and presented this god as the ultimate slave master. This sort of dictum had the power to reinforce color gradations. See Michael A. Gomez *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

with whites. As he put it, "the improvements of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites, has been observed by every one, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life."\(^{44}\) In an interesting twist, Jefferson is suggesting that blacks establish their inferiority once and for all because their social improvement only comes through mixture and observation of whites. Jefferson considered blacks equal to whites in memory, for instance, but greatly inferior in reason. In imagination, he posited, blacks are "dull, tasteless, and anomalous."\(^{45}\) For Jefferson the sole fair testing ground of their capabilities was the United States. Therefore, given the extent of the wanting principally in the areas of reason and inferior culture, blacks needed whites as much as white relayed on black labor. We thus turn to a brief laying out of white theories regarding blacks from a rational/cultural perspective and a resulting (at least for some) imperative the help this afflicted race.

The genesis of a paternalistic line of thought concerning blacks is linked to their perceived innate inadequacy of reason. Thomas Cobb, a Georgia lawyer and legal scholar during the mid 1850s as well as leading secessionist offered an inquiry into slavery from a legal perspective. Advancing an analysis on the character of black slaves while simultaneously advancing a legal theory regarding slavery in general, he concluded not only that the institution was legitimate because of black inferiority but also that slavery's second hand utility is that it aided in the advancement of the black race.

Cobb proceeds with this legal theory in defense of an institutionalized slave system in his essay *An Inquiry into the Law of Negro Slavery in the United States of America*. For him, such a query was tantamount to an entomological analysis. Slavery,

\(^{44}\) Jefferson, *Writings*, 267.
\(^{45}\) Ibid. 266.
he posited, even existed among animals and insects. For example, the red ant would regularly conquer and subjugate the black (or Negro) ant, who are then subjected to labor in the red ant colonies. In this way, argues Cobb, a natural order of slavery exists within all natural and societal schema, whether animal or human. Upon this establishment of facts, Cobb contends therefore that "of the law of nature, negro slavery would seem perfectly consistent with that law." 46 Thus, for Cobb, the issue of slavery as a legal matter was inextricably tied to the natural order and ranking of humankind. Bound by this dictum an interesting position emerges, slavery was only unnatural in cases where those beings being subjugated are equal with those attempting to wield authoritative power against them. Accordingly, he moves toward an idea that "it is undoubtedly true, that the enslavement, by one man or one race, of another man or another race, physically, intellectually, and morally their equals, is contrary to the law of nature, because it promotes not their happiness, and tends not to their perfection." 47

From this dichotomous line of thought (regarding whether or not negro slavery is consistent with natural order), Cobb is motivated to first inquire into the very "nature of the negro." That is, "in order to justify his subjection we must inquire of his intellectual and moral nature, and must be satisfied that its development is thereby promoted." 48 For him, it seemed clearly that the African's physical, intellectual, and moral development was promoted within and by a state of enslavement, and that "their happiness was secured to a greater extent than if left at liberty." Therefore, Negro slavery was in fact consistent with the law of nature because it not only failed to violate these provisions, but

46 Thomas R. R. Cobb, "What is Slavery, and Its Foundation in the Natural Law (1858)" in Defending Slavery: Proslavery Thought in the Old South, A Brief History with Documents, edited by Paul Finkelman (Boston: Bedford/ St. Martin's, 2003), 145.
47 Ibid., 146.
48 Cobb, "What is Slavery," 146.
it also tended toward the enhancement of an entire race of people. Finally then, the negro, based on inherent inferiority on all levels, functions best in slavery.

In what could be considered a categorical analysis, Cobb then lays out the affirmative reasons for black enslavement. To begin, he considers the physiological merits in relation to ones that relate to the slave's intellectual capacity. Cobb argues that blacks are superior at adapting to extreme servitude, stating that "[h]is black color peculiarly fits him for the endurance of the heat of long-continued summers."49 This adaptability to labor in extreme conditions based on physical make up was, as far as Cobb was concerned, based on "impartial and scientific" investigations by leading scientists and physicians of the antebellum period. Whether or not the sole intention was to justify slavery, it was argued by way of science that blacks were immune to certain diseases that devastated whites. Ultimately, some found that such a position was partially correct. Blacks were immune to some forms of malaria because they more often tended to be carriers of sickle cell or the trait.50

In his 1851 *Report on the Diseases of and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race*, Samuel Cartwright, a leading physician in New Orleans, advanced certain scientific conclusions about blacks. Specializing in the study of what were called "Negro diseases," he offered this report to the Medical Association of Louisiana, which the *New Orleans Medical and Surgical Journal* promptly published. In the report, Cartwright uses science, according to his understanding of it, to justify the enslavement of blacks. His central task was to highlight the peculiar nature of their diseases but first sought to assess the "anatomical and physiological differences between the Negro and the white

49 Cobb, "What is Slavery," 148.
man; otherwise their diseases cannot be understood."51 For him, the differences went far beyond the skin’s surface, calling attention to the differences in the membranes, the muscles, the tendons and in all the fluids and secretions. As he put it, “even the negro’s brain and nerves, the chyle and all the humors, are tinctured with a shade of [the] pervading darkness.”52 Cartwright’s investigation submitted as well that blacks had blacker blood than whites. Utilizing these findings as well as many others he lays out several diseases that are particular to blacks and thus necessitated a certain type of treatment, best gained within the slave system. Thus, these positions underscore the thoroughgoing efforts to establish the physical viability of blacks for extreme and demanding labor.

We have seen before with Jefferson query that blacks could withstand the heat better than whites but we briefly return to Cobb as he adds a twist. According to Cobb, blacks also benefited from smaller brains and thus not only lacked resonant intellect, but were made physically better because of it. Therefore, on the matter of the ethical merits of slavery Cobb reasons that we deal with the negro “as we find him, and according to the measure of his capacity, it is our duty to cultivate and improve him, leaving to time to solve the problem, whether he is capable of restoration to that pristine equality” to whites.53

The African American lot in life conjured thoughts of hopelessness for the learned observer for Cobb never observed their comprehension of what they have learned or retention of the refined civilization taught to them via enslavement. Even worse, blacks

52 Ibid.
53 Cobb, “What is Slavery,”149.
had never formed great political states, not "commenced a self-evolving civilization."\textsuperscript{54} Blacks thus suffered from permanent defect. They could neither form a "definite idea of effects from causes" nor could they "comprehend, so as to execute the simplest orders."\textsuperscript{55} Thus, the also morally corrupt "naturally mendacious," overtly lascivious black slave stood only to gain from enslavement. Cobb's ultimate conclusion: "The important truth is...that contact with the Caucasian is the only civilizer of the negro, and slavery the only condition on which that contact can be preserved."\textsuperscript{56}

Not to be outdone on the matter of the "enslaveability" of blacks and the necessary patriarchal guidance of whites, social historian Alexander Kinmont was seen by many in 1839 as a noteworthy authority on the matter. In a series of twelve lectures on the \textit{Natural History of Man and the Rise and Progress of Philosophy} Kinmont sets up a dichotomous pedagogical presentation about the racial differences that reinforce the necessity of white authoritative tutelage over subjugated blacks. His argument is set on a simple premise, "[s]o far back as our own history goes, we find an evident progress in the Caucasian race, while on the contrary the Negro appears to us to have been stationary."\textsuperscript{57} Accordingly, the very design of nature was for whites to be above all other races, especially blacks. In part, the structure of his argument is based on the white disposition to wander and conquer. He maintains, "the African stays home, is contented and satisfied—a feature of natural character, which, while associated in our imagination with his present degradation, may appear even a part of that very degradation."\textsuperscript{58} This lack of

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Cobb, "What is Slavery," 152.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 156.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 217.
terrestrial movement, or even the exhibited desire to do so, contributes to his lowly social state.

An intriguing byproduct surfaces from Kinmont’s argument. He presents the idea that blacks “should have been naturally confined to the peninsula of Africa.” For it is within the confines of the African continent, as it were, that blacks could reveal the worth of their existence. That is, according to Kinmont, “they will display in their native land some very peculiar and interesting traits of character,” from which whites, being of a “distinct branch of the human family” have no conception.59 Outside the “friendly confines” of Africa, blacks exhibit more of a childlike quality, an “unsophisticated nature,” and an extreme gentleness that beckons stern paternal guidance. While it was “a sad error” to extract blacks from their homeland, where their meek talents could shine, the Caucasian race is called, if not required, to share their genius of arts and intellect with them. Through this process, a “far nobler civilization awaits” the black race.

Whether indirectly or with vehemence, the anti-beauty project framed black bodies as most worthy objects for use in slavery. For me this process conjures a simultaneous idea of the splendor of this black flesh, in that these bodies were also a necessity. Thoroughgoing efforts to establish social domination over these bodies required both the fortified idea of putridity and an affixed value from their labor. Taking the idea of splendor of black flesh seriously, we must conclude that the organized project of establishing the black body as “other” secondarily reinforces a desire to secure its soundness. In this regard, a healthy black body was desired as a useful tool for securing planter profits.

59 Ibid., 190.
Historian Sharla Fett argues that this idea of bodily soundness irrevocably bound the health of enslaved African Americans to the chattel principal. Soundness here is rightly connected with general prescriptions of slave health that allowed them to be effective laborers. As a result, prevailing concerns of soundness and value constrained slaveholder perceptions of slave health to a narrow range of bodily suffering and well-being.\textsuperscript{60} A slave’s narrowly defined “sound” health was constantly at risk if the planter class was not pleased with their labor. Through the ritualizing of slave auctions and other heinous tactics to maintain planter class domination, the slave’s status is given social force and meaning because it makes explicit the re-creation of the slave as a “thing.”\textsuperscript{61} Therefore, the connection between the justifications that have been highlighted and actual physical treatment of these bodies must also arrest our full attention. These bodies are socially placed or fixed within a racially charged civil constriction that aims to maintain the status quo even through extreme means, whether physical, psychological, spiritual, or social. Arrested by these historical antecedents with respect to bodily treatment and projected ideas of their worth, we are now poised to engage a theoretical discussion of the ways antebellum black bodies were socially placed for public understanding.

The Social Placement of the Black Body as Corporeal Constriction

Former North Carolina slave, James Curry, chronicles his experiences with his Christian master Moses Chambers. He reflects with great esteem the piety of his master and the biblical structure with which he ordered his plantation. Curry recalls that Master


\textsuperscript{61} Pinn, \textit{Terror and Triumph}, 49.
Chambers and his family would never miss a Sabbath day worship at their church. It was then that Curry, a slave, would “go into the house and get down the great Bible” belonging to his master to learn of God. Yet, Curry would also experience and witness actions of his master that seemed contrary to the piety that seemed to evident in Mr. Chambers’ daily life and religious activities. Curry reflects upon two important slavery realities that surround the culminating concern of this chapter: arduous labor and the physical breaking of black bodies.

Tobacco was the principle product produced on Mr. Chambers’ plantation. Secondary to tobacco, cotton and some grains were produced. The key for satisfying the field overseer was speed and precision in hoeing the fields. Curry remembers that the overseers would take a slave, one at a time, and rank them by speed and accuracy. The lead overseer would even threaten severe beatings for those who failed to work fast enough. The potential for brutality against a slave was ever-present. Curry offers the following account regarding one of the more pious slaves on his plantation who was

[T]hreatened with whipping by his overseer. He refused to submit...[and] ran into the woods. They immediately followed and set the hounds after him. They run him until he got to the mill-pond, into a bend of which they drove him, where there was no turning to the right or left. He had never swam, but the hounds were behind him, and he plunged in, swam to the middle of the pond, and sank to rise no more. A fellow slave, on hearing of it...found him...and brought him to shore, and his companions buried him. The master told them that he would give any slave a hundred lashes, who should be known to shed a tear, and several of them were whipped cruelly for this tribute of sorrow over their released fellow-sufferer. 

Thus, the social system of enslavement sought on every level to control these commodified black bodies whether through overuse, fear, or extreme brutality. What

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becomes most clear from such an account is that control of these bodies rested in profound ways with the planter and slaveholding class.

As we have elsewhere discussed, evident from their treatment of black slaves was the fact that whites rationalized external blackness of the body as indicative of the internal depravity of the soul. In fact, in certain instances, slaveholders reasoned that blacks had no souls at all. Such a line of reasoning prompted them to deal callously with their slaves. Europeans sought to dehumanize slaves, whom they considered problematic “things” who were closer to animals than humans. In fact, the enslaved African had no social existence, no existence as a subject of history, outside that of the master. The slave was not socially recognized and thus lacked both objective confirmation and subjective certainty of his or her human worth. Slaves within this social stratum were identified solely according to their usefulness relative to slave labor. A sense of “otherness” was projected onto blacks, which promoted an ideology that slaves had no feelings, and, therefore, were not human, as whites were.

Racism concomitantly complicates and frames the issue of African American suffering. Pinpointing African Americans as the objects of white racism and hegemonic treatment creates a societal structure wherein suffering becomes normative. Some blacks have accepted this structure as the status quo. In accepting their suffering, black Christians throughout history were not accepting the racist argument that God intended them to suffer; rather, they were asserting that they were empowered to make something

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63 Riggins R. Earl, Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, Community in the Slave Mind (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2003), 13.
65 Ibid.
66 This “otherness” projection, in objectifying black beings, re-imaged them as “things” rather than humans. As “things” they were suitable for inhumane treatment, which, according to some slaveholders, would not need to be called into question. See Pinn, Terror and Triumph.
out of suffering.⁶⁷ Suffering, under these conditions, becomes a fact of life. However, even with the prominence of suffering, individuals do not have to succumb to it. Suffering and injustice must be challenged at the deepest existential level, the level of defeat and despair that Christ overcame through his passion, death, and resurrection.⁶⁸ Even with the empowerment that accompanied an association with Christ, it seems logical that some who converted to Christianity questioned God in light of their social conditions. The temptations to despair, to reject Christianity as white man’s religion, to abandon belief in a God who permits the innocent to suffer were, by all accounts, very real.⁶⁹

The results of adverse treatment, teamed with its level of extreme signification, as we discussed in chapter one, manifests itself in the silencing of a people. Truncated agency, the physical and mental affects of slavery and oppression, and the resulting social refuse calls for a particular way of understanding this social reality. In the process of fully considering the social placement of antebellum black bodies we do so in light of what we have heretofore observed: the extent to which justifications of enslavement were pressed into Southern antebellum culture and the often vicious tactics associated with reinforcing slave order. We now pay closer attention to the ways in which this schema of social placement gives rise to a particular way of understanding and utilizing religion. Our endeavor thus prompts us to identify and begin to more formally tease out how I am deploying this social placement idea. Accordingly, our next task is to identify the nature of this constricted social experience for blacks in the antebellum period.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 193.
⁶⁹ Ibid.
Identifying the Silenced Bodies & Theorizing Social Placement

Giorgio Agamben gives critical attention to the affect of sovereign will exerted on the powerless within certain defined spaces.\(^{70}\) Advancing a theory of *Homo Sacer* (Sacred Man) one might say Agamben attempts to give a name, albeit in generic form, to Edith Wyschogrod’s “voiceless others” displaced, silenced, and adversely affected in history. While we will focus more closely on his work as we later unpack this theory in relation to the social placement of the black body, I’d like to give initial attention to a few of his ideological fine points. Agamben advances the name Homo Sacer as representative of the voiceless and nameless others. For Agamben this Homo Sacer is the *embodiment* of the barest form of life, which has been signified upon and “qualified” by the sovereign. This qualification, as it were, is the only form of acknowledgment Homo Sacer receives within socio-political and historical order. I posit an understanding of this figure within the communal context as the corporeally constricted. The significance of a defined space, the Agamdenian “state of exception,” is that within its sovereign will can be freely exerted without concern for reprisal or juridical action. While we will take up this issue more fully in chapter three, it is sufficient for now to understand that this reality makes the task of uncovering the history of these “others” a most dubious one.

Sociologist Simon Williams speculates that “[o]ne of the main ways in which bodies are socially ordered, sorted and segregated is through the use of ritual and

symbolism.\textsuperscript{71} Therefore, as a firsthand concern, these bodies are grasped in terms of their representation. I mark this "social placement of the black body" as a point of entry to understanding the nature of antebellum black embodied experience. In this sense, I am not referring to this body as \textit{soma}, a body solely of flesh distinct from soul, mind, spirit, or psyche. This body is all-encompassing with regard to these elements and yet is understood as more than these. This black body is seen as simultaneously communal and individual, externally inhibited and internally vibrant in its perpetual efforts to carve out a better space for itself. As a line of thought it best functions as a way of understanding context, offering a certain and nuanced grounding for our discussion. At its best this point of entry offers a view or perspective with regard to the social results drawn from the treatment and utilization of black bodies during the antebellum period. This query simply sets forth the idea that within the antebellum black socio-political and religious experience, over and above their utility, these bodies existed in part as terrifying spectacle to whites and were thus forced to society's fringes. By way of interpretation this work is attempting to uncover what it means to live under such a framed social structure.

In socio and bio-political manifestation this social placement takes the form of \textit{corporeal constriction}. That is to say, it relates to the ways in which these particular bodies were projected as social realities of the day. This descriptive phrase draws attention to the fact that it was the material body, not always the spirit, confined in adverse ways. Even still, the constriction of these corporeal realities affects the ways in which the spirit attaches itself to an understanding of the Divine and orients itself to the

world in general. The extra-corporeal qualities of these beings attempt, as we shall attest in chapter four, to redefine the social and bio-political reality of its fleshly encasement. Constriction within this context is best understood as the ways in which the sovereign will of the planter class narrowed, confined, and placed encircling pressure on these bodies in ways that obliterated an opportunity for them to be read and understood outside of white constructed social realities. These realities did not function merely as points of conversation. The very reinforcement of hegemonic social and political constructions of these black bodies was aimed at their destruction. In other words, ideas of their social placement encouraged foul treatment, even if no basis to do so existed. Herein lies the insidious function and nature of this corporeal constriction ideology.

One of the overriding questions of this chapter considers the reason for a distinct [black] religious experience and, how to best understand the preceding events that gave rise to it. In light of this, the social disdain and sanctioned, even juridical, control over black bodies has been our focus—which is the content of the idea of social placement.

But what is the distinctive quality of social placement as described here? It is important to understand that the idea of social placement I am positing precedes religious experience. That fact, it colors and frames religious experience, its nature and its features. What makes it a unique phenomenon in relation to the history of this country? Social critic and novelist James Baldwin gives insight and perspective for a possible answer to this question. In his words:

If one is permitted to treat any group of people with special disfavor because of their race or the color of their skin, there is no limit to what one will force them to endure, and, since the entire [black] race has been
mysteriously indicted, no reason not to attempt to destroy it root and branch.\textsuperscript{72}
For African Americans, a deceptive construction of life is embodied in the above portion of James Baldwin's powerful book, \textit{The Fire Next Time}. For blacks in the United States reality and meaning become tied to the extreme maltreatment of one race by another. The power of sovereign authority to corporeally constrict black bodies in extreme ways seems to have no limits. Baldwin reasons, therefore, that the disfavored group will have to endure constriction at the behest of another group even if it ultimately results in obliteration. But what then is the nature of the black body as a human being in this corporeally constricted sense?

To aid our understanding of social placement (as corporeal constriction), I return to Giorgio Agamben's figure \textit{Homo Sacer}. This time, we want to engage in a more detailed dissection of this important figure as it relates to African American socio-political and religious experience in the ante-bellum period. Agamben argues for a life structure wherein politics (including the wielding of sovereign power by slaveholders) differs completely from various forms of bare life (that lowest or unqualified form of life bestowed upon all). Those remaining on the level of bare life have little to no privilege or, in some cases, autonomy. Formatively, Agamben expresses the difference between \textit{zoe}—that is, undifferentiated bare life unmarked by political qualification—and \textit{bios}—a way of life dependent upon and in relation to a community, which politically stands as a qualified form of life. Bare life remains included in politics in the form of exception, that is, included solely through an exclusion.\textsuperscript{73}

Bare life may attempt to oppose sovereignty but will never overcome it, lest it becomes sovereign itself. It is, to be sure, a life on the fringes, only included within society on the basis of exclusion from polity. For Agamben, accounting for these social/political structures is important to understanding the function of life itself. The concept of *Homo Sacer* (sacred man) becomes important within this societal arrangement as the *embodiment* of bare life that has been signified upon by the sovereign.

Bereft of fully realized inclusion into society, *Homo Sacer* is signified as "other" by sovereign authority. This otherness allows *Homo Sacer* to be excluded from the community by way of a truncated inclusion. *Homo Sacer* differs from simple bare life in the sense that it is a *qualified life*, filling the area of in-distinction between *bios* (sovereign life) and *zoe* (bare life). *Homo Sacer* is that person through whom sovereign power and bare life are distinguished *and* related—revealing the picture of bare life in relation to the sovereign. *Homo Sacer* is thus qualified in the sense that it points the observer to both sovereignty and subjugated bare life as a functioning societal arrangement. Agamben introduces the concept of the *ban* in the sense that *Homo Sacer*, whose existence and function is similar to that of the *Wolfman*, is forced by the sovereign to the fringes of society because it exists as a terrifying spectacle to those who observe it. In this sense, the *Homo Sacer* is excluded from the community through a certain type of inclusion—defined or marked existence by the sovereign.\(^4\) Such a framework marks this process of the ban arbitrary and, using Agamben's term on the matter, ambiguous. Thus, the relationship between the sacred and the ban implies the ambiguity of both independently of and in relation to each other.

\(^4\) Ibid., 77.
This notion of the ambiguous can be appropriately connected to sociologist Emile Durkheim. For him the whole of religious life gravitates about two contrary poles between which there is the same opposition as between the pure and the impure, the saint and the sacrilegious, the divine and the diabolic.75 Even with such opposition, these countervailing forms of religious life share a common bond. For instance, both sides are averse to what each camp might consider profane—those things that each may find deplorable or reeking of most incomprehensible injustice. The profane, in relation to the sacred for each, functions as a testament of values, culture, symbol, or general ways of being in the world. In such a structure the ambiguous arises and is prominent in that what is sacred becomes subjective. Even an impure thing or evil power becomes a holy thing or a guardian power, without changing its nature, through a simple modification of external circumstances.76 In such an arrangement, even what is slaughtered and considered profane can in turn be employed for pious uses or simply left for dead without acknowledgement or merit. Experiential circumstances drive the merit placed on the extent of the sacredness of a thing. In Durkheim’s reasoning, then,

[T]he pure and the impure are not two separate classes, but two varieties of the same class, which includes all sacred things. There are two sorts of sacredness, the propitious and the unpropitious, and not only is there no break of continuity between these two opposed forms, but also one object may pass from the one to the other without changing its nature. The pure is made out of the impure, and reciprocally. It is in the possibility of these transmutations that the ambiguity of sacred consists.77

Thus a social structure can be arranged in such a way as to arbitrarily render a qualified life to be endowed with unalienable rights vis-à-vis an (also being) unqualified life. As

76 Ibid., 457.
77 Ibid., 458.
Durkheim concludes, “the two poles of religious life correspond to the two opposed states through which all social life passes.”

The relationship between the sovereign (who wields authority) and sacred man (Homo Sacer) thus inherently projects a double meaning. Sacer designates the person or the thing that one cannot touch without dirtying oneself or without dirtying; hence the double meaning of 'sacred' or 'accursed.' Ambivalence is at the root of our conception of the socio-political existence of the figure of Homo Sacer. This life encompasses a juridical-political dimension that leaves it continually and at once at odds with and subject to the very controlling force that both creates (by way of signification) and requires it (by way of self-actualization and self-conception). These two entities exist because the other exists.

In relation to the ambiguous and arbitrary nature of the sacred, Homo Sacer's most "defining" quality is its ability to be killed but not sacrificed. Two traits simultaneously mark Homo Sacer's existence: the unpunishability of killing and the exclusion from sacrifice. By nature of this socio-political arrangement, the application of law can be arbitrarily suspended or carried out in ways that fall outside of civil juridical order (wherein the rights of some can be simultaneously be granted or stripped). In the case of Homo Sacer, a person is simply set outside human jurisdiction without being brought into the realm of divine law. The concept of the ban thus excludes Homo Sacer from being considered a victim. In short, the fact that the killing was permitted.

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78 Ibid., 460.
79 Agamben, Homo Sacer, 79.
80 Ibid., 81.
81 Ibid., 82.
implies that the violence done to Homo Sacer does not constitute sacrilege.\textsuperscript{82} A bleak picture arises from this social arrangement. Agamben lays it out this way,

Homo Sacer belongs to God in the form of unsacrificability and is included in the community in the form of being able to be killed. Life that cannot be sacrificed and yet may be killed is sacred life. What defines the status Homo Sacer is therefore not the originary ambivalence of the sacredness that is assumed to belong to him, but rather both the particular character of the double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed. This violence—the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit—is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege.\textsuperscript{83}

This is not verbal wordplay. To be sure, some may associate the sacred with that which is valued and thus sacrificial in some way. However, as used here, our link of Homo Sacer’s merits as being solely tied to God renders it sacred in an odd way.

This form of sacred status is at once negative and bare in political order but is still considered a form of life, if only sacred (in conventionally positive terms) to God. The fluidity of its sacred status is seen in that for some reason or another, its sacredness seals its fate. Its sacredness is the very thing positioning it for mistreatment and destruction due to its status as an unqualified life. Accordingly, as Agamben reveals above, we are dealing with a form of sacredness that has been turned on its head. Instead of the conventional conceptualization of the term sacred, which is generally connected to the divine and regarded with respect and reverence, Homo Sacer’s sacred state points to its exclusion from the right to justice. Sacredness here is inextricably tied to violence and ones ability to receive it while simultaneously being unable to gain retribution for it.

Consequently, sovereign power can kill, extinguish, or obliterate Homo Sacer (within certain defined spaces) without fear of repercussion, consequence, or punishment.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
The “sacrifice” points to the accountability associated with the kill. A sacrifice either brings atonement to or retribution on the killer. In this case, however, the sacredness of life is relative to political and social order established by the sovereign. Therefore, Homo Sacer, existing on the fringes and defined by sovereign will, can be killed quietly. Home Sacer’s very existence is controlled to some degree by its relationship to the sovereign, who can in turn make the Homo Sacer disappear without celebration, fanfare, or remorse. The very body of Homo Sacer is, in its capacity to be killed but not sacrificed, a living pledge to his subjection to a power of death.  

Considered religiously Homo Sacer takes on nuance which carves a path toward a response that creates a space for agency within the confines of the subjugated community. In contrast to the victimization that marks the nature of Homo Sacer’s existence, his sacrality, as Carter puts it, consists precisely in his being accepted from within the religious sphere. We are again reminded of the oddity of this figure thus being labeled sacred. This sacred stance now functions within a gap of sorts that strings together both the political and religious, the sovereign and subjugated, creating our first glances at counter-discourse.

Within the African American context, the social placement analysis shows that sovereign freedom to sell, barter, maim, or kill without fear of retribution or legal consequence reflects the extent of sovereign power vis-à-vis black social/political positioning. Even in instances where blacks were “acknowledged” as a part of society it should be understood as having distinct limits. In this way, Agamben’s concept of the

84 Ibid., 99.
85 Ibid., 183.
ban applied to African Americans, whose existence and function is also similar to that of the Wolfman, expresses the ways in which they were forced by sovereign will to the fringes of society because they existed as a terrifying spectacle to white authority.

The complex reality of this constructed social ethos was not lost on African American abolitionists and leaders during the antebellum period. In 1844 Dr. James McCune Smith, the first African American to practice medicine, crystallizes an understanding of the Wolfman conceptualization when he mockingly exposes the scientific fallacy of phrenological construction of back bodies, stating that

The Negro “with us” is not an actual physical being of flesh and bones and blood, but a hideous monster of the mind, ugly beyond all physical portraying, so utterly and ineffably monstrous as to frighten reason from its throne, and justice from its balance, and mercy from its hallowed temple, and to blot out shame and probity, and the eternal sympathies of nature, so far as these things have presence in the breasts or being of American republicans! No sir! It is a constructive Negro—a John Roe and Richard Doe Negro, that haunts with grim presence the precincts of this republic, shaking his gory locks over legislative halls and family prayers.\[86\]

In short order Dr. Smith dispatched a critique regarding the basis of white fears about black bodies. In essence, the root of white disgust and fear of these subjugated bodies was an overreaching idea of black bodies as the very personification of all things vile and monstrous. Such an application reveals the level to which black bodies, even outside of instances of physical destruction, were culturally and socially despised while giving rise to a distinct religious experience. What is more, even with the actual reality of their “normal” or “John Doe” nature, Smith reveals that these bodies were living and breathing monuments of their very social placement as beings constricted by planter class authority.

It is important to maintain our focus on the dual social realms wherein this black body functions. Political and religious countervailing principles will therefore govern the majority of what this dissertation ultimately argues with respect to the utility and functionality of religion. The metaphorical idea of Homo Sacer is but one part of what makes up this body. But what of the lived experience of the body that feels? Our consideration must also deal with this body as material, as an actual physical receiver and participant in suffering.


We have thus far considered these black bodies as a byproduct of terrible treatment in the sense of metaphor. That is, these bodies were queried as representation. Nonetheless, "symbolic approaches to the human body none the less provide a powerful means of grasping its socially constructed nature as a 'natural symbol' of society."\(^7\) We must keep in mind, however, that there is a physical component to this state of existence as well. Capturing only the representational aspect of these bodies neglects required attention on social praxis and the actual 'use' to which these bodies are placed in society and the learnt 'techniques' they draw upon in the conduct and negotiation of everyday life.\(^8\) We therefore move to a discussion of the material (natural) and thus the physical treatment of these bodies within a milieu of lived experience. The effects of maltreatment on the flesh of these black bodies should not be neglected in our analysis of

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\(^7\) Williams and Bendelow, _The Lived Body_, 26.
\(^8\) Ibid., 28.
socio-political order. The body, in and of itself, is not only deeply embedded in the core of a sociological query, but it forms the basis for any analysis of social action.\textsuperscript{89}

Beyond metaphorical understandings of the black body, constriction in terms of physical space and placement also demands our attention. This constricted social positioning is by no means an intrinsically \textit{sui generis} experience but rather an imposed state of existing and feeling within life. Accordingly, we endeavor to further grasp this social body as experienced in flesh. The physical/material component of corporeal constriction calls for an understanding of antebellum black bodies as politically \textit{coiled prey}. Conceptualized in terms of a snake, who constricts its prey for proper consumption, imposed pressure encircles antebellum blacks to best position them for socio-political use (consumption) for the planter class. Retaliatory options narrowed, the constricted black body experiences the extreme ill effects of slavery. Accounting for these embodied experiences calls for a sociology of the body. We begin with the work of sociologist Erving Goffman to unpack the significance of the felt experience within the embodied self in everyday life.

Socio-politically coiled prey feels the pressure of this potentially asphyxiating experience. These bodies, as connected to the self, are continually risked in the ritualistic encounters and public spaces of everyday life.\textsuperscript{90} Wrestling with the issue of social identity within the context of everyday life and events is Erving Goffman’s central task in \textit{Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity}. Identifying the inherent angst associated with the socially projected metaphor of the body that grows from oppression,

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 1.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 57.
Goffman advances the idea that certain bodies are stigmatized. As a result of the stigma, which takes physical form, these bodies are disqualified from full social acceptance.\(^91\)

*Stigma*, as Goffman posits it, refers to “bodily signs designed to expose something,” but more particularly, “a blemished person, ritually polluted, to be avoided, especially in public places.”\(^92\) Ritual is best seen here as “social intercourse” or established social arrangements wherein the actual happenings of stigmatization take place. Rather than the customary understanding of ritual as a set-aside practice of something in particular, this understanding of ritual expresses itself in the mundane, the everyday. One could both readily observe and miss it. The stigmatization ritual happens without warning, revealing it as both arbitrary and a normal part of social existence. This nature of activity comports itself in the form of Agamben’s Wolfman existence. Here we understand it on the level of felt experience, as material.

The term stigma, as used by Goffman, refers “to an attribute that is deeply discrediting.”\(^93\) This term stigma conjures feelings of what in means to be a person. Self-perception is a first order response to this stigmatized treatment. As a result the stigmatized can respond in shame and dismay regard his or her lot in life. Simultaneously, others refuse to accord the stigmatized even minimal levels of respect or human dignity. For the onlooker stigmatization reveals “social information” about a person. Goffman holds that this social information “is about more or less abiding characteristics, as opposed to the moods, feelings, or intents that” one “might have at a

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\(^91\) Concerns surrounding Goffman’s lack of attention to non-white understandings of this stigmatized reality should be noted here. I make use of this theoretical tool while also accounting for its shortcomings in the African American context. However, I believe its functions, even its limitations, offers a cogent illustrative nugget as we account for one possible way these bodies are perceived.


\(^93\) Ibid., 3.
particular moment.” As such, certain characteristics are bolstered as representative of normal, generally deplorable or reprehensive, social action. Accordingly, social information conveys one’s class position as desirable or detestable.

The social information grows out of strategic ordering of social existence. To the extent that these persons are discredited, one finds a routine cycle of restrictions; to the extent that they are discreditable, he or she faces the challenge of managing information about himself or herself. We again come face-to-face with the political corollary of this social arrangement. Again the Agambenian Wolfman and theory of the ban emerges in the material. Goffman asserts that

[...]he special situation of the stigmatized is that society tells him he is a member of the wider group, which means he is a normal human being, but that he is also “different” in some degree, and that it would be foolish to deny this difference. This differentness itself of course derives from society, for ordinarily before a difference can matter much it must be conceptualized collectively by the society as a whole.

Thus, ideas about those marked in this way are pervasive in ways that breed what I consider social framing of individuals. What is more, in varying ways, the stigmatized is told what they ought think of themselves. When considered in terms of racial groups, this process functions “as a means of removing minorities from various avenues of competition.” That is, stigmatization in the vein reveals itself as a method of social control. The coiled prey of society then feels the effects of resulting social restriction and castigation physically and emotionally.

This coiled prey faces few options as they are surrounded and continually compressed. This idea identifies the physical effects of enslavement and its material

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94 Ibid., 43.
96 Ibid., 123.
97 Ibid., 139.
connection to the perceptions of the black body heretofore highlighted. These bodies or coiled prey notice the plausible discrepancies between virtual and actual social identity. Still, the stigmatized individuals define themselves as no different from any other human being while simultaneously being defined as others as set apart.\textsuperscript{98} Definitions that affect the physical body thus take the form of adverse treatment. We now highlight a few illustrations of this material reality.

A potent initial example resides in the medical practices of whites on slaves during the antebellum period. Sharla Fett submits that whites employed medicine "not to preserve the body but to discipline and torture" it.\textsuperscript{99} Thus this coiled prey is faced with the problem that comprises the central argument of Harriet Washington's book \textit{Medical Apartheid}. In this vital work, Washington sets out on the task of comprehensively revealing the history of medical experimentation on blacks in the U.S. She charts the fallout and results of African American thoughts about white healthcare and the resulting distrust. Unearthing what she considers as a problem of racial homogeneity among white American medical researchers and practitioners, Washington pinpoints this issue as the core problem of black vulnerability throughout U.S. history. Antebellum blacks in particular, she argues, were subjected to southern medicine, which at that time was harsh, ineffective, and painfully experimental in nature.

Scientific racism provided medical justification for slavery, with such notions often informed by both science and the Bible. According to Washington, "[p]hysicians were active participants in the exploitation of African American bodies." What is more, she continues, "slaves were both medically neglected and abused because they were

\textsuperscript{98} Goffman, \textit{Stigma}, 108.  
powerless and legally invisible."\textsuperscript{100} Many doctors bought slaves for the sole purpose of conducting painful experiments, too painful, objectionable, and risky to perform on whites. What is more, some treatments worsened slave's physical problems and slaves knew it.\textsuperscript{101} As Washington succinctly puts it, "more than scientific racism... involuntary medical experimentation was the scientific personification of enslavement."\textsuperscript{102} As stigmatized coiled prey these black bodies were forced to conceive of themselves as subjects based in large part on racial differences. These perceptions did not merely stop as motivating ideas in the justification of enslavement. Rather, they resulted as well in a physical toll on their bodies. We now move to a deeper historical reckoning of this process, both on the representative (metaphor/projection) and physical levels.

Ritualized killings of black flesh reveal the extremes of the coiled prey's existence we here describe. Principally, the black body at certain points during the antebellum period, and more vigorously during the postbellum/reconstruction period, suffered under a dark period of serial lynching. With regard to the primacy of the kill and black bodies, religious scholar Theophsus Smith associates the violence suffered by blacks in America with a Girardian concept of the Scapegoat. Drawing from theorist Rene Girard, Smith advances the concept according to the ancient Greek scapegoat, which was

\textsuperscript{100} Harriet Washington, \textit{Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present} (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 30. Notable as well regarding the physical treatment of black bodies during the antebellum period is the work of Todd Savitt. Linking material treatment and handling of black bodies to their viability as slaves Savitt reveals the nature of the efforts to push and force black bodies into extreme labor. To justify slavery many argued that blacks were immune to certain diseases that devastated whites. Some of these ideas were partially correct. Savitt, as with others, argues that blacks were immune to some forms of malaria because of sickle cell or the trait. Such a designation allowed for a certain type of use of black bodies, one charged by a desire to overburden these bodies under the governing ideology that they could withstand harsh physical labor. Todd Savitt, \textit{Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia} (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1978) and "Politics in Medicine: The Georgia Freedman's Bureau and the Organization of Health Care," in \textit{Civil War History} 28 (1982). See also Dorothy Roberts, \textit{Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty} (New York: Pantheon, 1997).

\textsuperscript{102} Washington, \textit{Medical Apartheid}, 30.

\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 54.
a human being called a *pharmakos* (a curative healing). The Athenians, in this light, would regularly detain a number of degraded and useless beings at the public expense. When calamity, such as plague, drought, or famine, befell the city, they sacrificed two outcasts as scapegoats. The concept is expressed in the African American context by way of representing them too as *pharmakoi* in a culture of domination. Therefore, often as backlash or reaction to African American enfranchisement (e.g., legislative empowerment after the Civil War), whites would beat or lynch African Americans as scapegoats to bear, in a sense, the perceived iniquities of America.\(^{103}\)

A key consideration within the concept of scapegoating, then, is that of *ritual*. Ritual sacrifice points the observer to a maimed and/or fully destroyed black body tied, albeit tragically, to a certain level of meaning. Often the ritual associated with the scapegoat allowed observers, notably African Americans, to seek legal remedy for this loss of human life, often to no avail. Blacks were therefore faced again with the reality of being the coiled prey. This meant, along the Homo Sacerian line, no formal “ritual” sacrifice could be affixed to the killing of their flesh. What they came to realize was that, within the framework of slavery, a “zone of indistinction” (the central thrust of chapter three) existed wherein no recourse at all would befall the sovereign killer. Within the

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\(^{103}\) Smith also explains the concept of “scapegoating” as it relates to the African American in comparison to the ancient understanding from the Hebraic practice recorded in Leviticus 16:21-22, which dealt with the high priest (Aaron) laying his hands on the head of a living goat to confess the iniquities of the nation so that the goat may bear all the iniquities of the land. For Rene Girard when society is at risk a *scapegoat mechanism* is triggered. The return of social order this necessitates the singling out and destruction of a body. For Girard, Jesus functioned as the final scapegoat, in that his resurrection reveals to the observer the evidence of his innocence. More than this, the extent of humankind’s unquenchable and mimetic tendencies toward extreme violence is revealed. See Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 96-99. See also, René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightening* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2001) and René Girard, *The Scapegoat* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, c1986).
physical parameters of southern slave states and plantations, few to no legal remedies existed for the enslaved.

I have attempted in this section to unpack the socio-historical nature of existence for antebellum blacks through a discussion of their social placement. We understand social placement best as the primary positioning of black bodies for optimal utilization for the planter class. Thus, black bodies, in the very form of the coiled prey, were constricted so as to properly position them for paramount use and abuse by the planter class. What becomes most clear is that the affects, whether socially, physically, or otherwise, are extreme and tragic. In spite of that, even with such a dark reality, a desire for more emerges—whether in the form of freedom in material movement or advancement from dire social circumstances. Our social placement ideology forms the milieu that compels the theory of religion that propels part two of this dissertation, wherein the nature of this religiosity will then become more apparent.

Conclusion

Kelly Brown Douglas makes a profound declaration about the religion practiced by many African Americans during the antebellum period: “the interface with power and the cross (of Christ), particularly in the platonized tradition, can be lethal and has been so for black bodies.”\textsuperscript{104} The reading of these bodies and resulting indictment on rational grounds, teamed with the sovereign power to control those bodies with biblical justification has formed a social impediment for a race people. This chapter has

\textsuperscript{104} Kelly Brown Douglas, \textit{What’s Faith Got To Do With It}, 42.
attempted to unearth several of these impediments to social advancement and material bodily freedom.

We began with a general discussion of an anti-black racial rationale, which was found to be pervasive during the antebellum period. Governed by theories of this rationale as one being deployed in “bad faith” and driven by a “normative gaze” that touts Caucasian physical aesthetics, values, and culture as superior and thus normative, we saw how calculated these positions were. These calculated positions were not offered as empty platitudes, rather they formed the underpinnings for varying justifications for the enslavement of African Americans.

The antebellum theological climate among planter class preachers and biblical expositors offered snapshots of the racialized thought governing this analysis. The paradoxical social mix of co-believing masters and slaves set the social tone for an odd religious experience, where master and slave potentially call upon the same God, seeking the same transformative ends, and empowering results from a relationship with the Divine. However, their experiences were on opposite poles of the social scale. The resulting theological climate, then, reveals function and utility of religion—ripe with potentially simultaneous intentions of stifling and bolstering, enslavement and liberation of body, and soul. This investigation moved us toward a focus on the many justifications of slavery.

As we observed, justifications manifested themselves in several and strategic ways. Guided by a seed of paternalism, slavemasters and the planter class in general saw their very “whiteness” as having divine attributes, thereby indwelling them with a special level of authority of blacks ad their bodes during the antebellum period. In this light,
justifications for slavery were advanced in accordance with the idea of perceived manifest destiny of white domination, which produced a “by any means necessary” mentality with respect to building a great nation. In so doing, establishing their racial superiority on rational, intellectual, cultural, political, biblical, and even physical grounds became the central task at hand. Science and the Bible were the ironic and readily available tools at their disposal, which the planter class used liberally.

The inquiry of slavery’s justifications formed the backdrop for the ultimate thrust and argument of chapter two: blacks during the antebellum period, notably in the South, existed in a unique social and bio-political setting we have called the social placement of the black body. *Corporeal constriction* is the term I advance as the principle way to identify this social reality. This position relates to the ways in which these particular bodies were metaphorically projected as social realities and confined in distinct unfavorable ways. The emphasis is on a particular understanding and “read” of these bodies in particular and the efforts to bind and loose them. In the end, this social dynamic represents a constant ebb and flow of ideas fueling the *anti-beauty project* administered against black bodies while simultaneously finding *splendor in this flesh* in accordance with its potential to secure profits for the planter class.

However, an additional feature about this process and social reality demanded our attention. Accordingly, our discussion unpacked the material features of corporeal constriction as one manifested in the form of what I expressed as the *coiled prey* of antebellum society. In this sense, black bodies physically experienced the ramifications of the anti-beauty project by way of physical maltreatment in medical practices or sanctioned killings. We were ultimately exposed to a corporeally constricted experience
wherein scapegoating tactics were imposed on black bodies in an attempt to secure or reestablish constricted social order. Thus, African American antebellum and postbellum experience was revealed as unique and formative for a particular religious ethos. Nevertheless, our work is not complete until we ask an additional question regarding the social placement of black bodies: how do we deal with the significance of the defined spaces where this hegemonic activity was taking place? Chapter three shall offer that exploration.
Chapter Three:

The Significance of the Location of Oppression:

The Boa's Macabre Arena

What happened in the camps so exceeds the juridical concept of crime that the specific juridico-political structure in which those events took place is often simply omitted from consideration.¹

—Giorgio Agamben

The crucial problem connected to the suspension of the law is that of the acts committed during the ius titium, the nature of which seems to escape all definition. Because they are neither transgressive, executive, nor legislative, they seem to be situated in an absolute non-place with respect to the law.²

—Giorgio Agamben

"I could report a multitude of cases in which slaves have been murdered, and no account has been taken of them."³

—Moses Roper, Former Georgia Slave, 1836

In chapter two we probed extensively my idea of corporeal constriction. This theory finds a place in our current discussion as well, but with a slightly altered emphasis.

There I introduced corporeal constriction as it relates to the ways in which these particular bodies were projected as social realities. Constriction is then connected to the tactics utilized by sovereign authority to narrow, confine, and place encircling pressure on black bodies. My current concern advances that argument, pushing toward an accounting for the significance of the geographic spaces where this treatment takes place.

This chapter probes the significance of private space as the arena for oppression. Couching such a discussion within the confines of our current analysis of black biopolitical treatment and resulting social placement during the antebellum period guides us toward the serious question governing this chapter: how do we best account for the very existence of the defined spaces where maltreatment took place during the antebellum period in the Old South? One might say that I am also concerned with an issue of jurisdiction as well. That is to say, in conjunction with defined space in general, I also want to inquire as to how public law, state’s rights, and juridical order all converge in relation to bio-political treatment of subjugated bodies within certain spaces. In so doing, I will consider how these issues, which effect society on the aggregate level, take on a unique quality within certain defined and separated spaces. As a primary tool I will return to an element of Giorgio Agamben’s work to assess the significance of law and juridical order within defined spaces.

In history we have been exposed to what Giorgio Agamben calls a “state of exception” or what may appropriately be named a zone of indifference—a cordoned off place, hidden from the general public, where anything can happen. Primary among several examples, Agamben calls our attention to the work of the Third Reich in and through the concentration camps, Napoleon’s decree of 1811, and George Bush’s
"military order" issued on November 13, 2001. While I too see these as critical in laying out a historical formula for understating the nature and structure of this state of exception, in fact I will briefly illustrate my argument by looking at the camps, this chapter will advance the idea that the principal way in which this idea gets played out in the North American context is in the plantation and chattel slavery. Accordingly, it claims that the plantation, broadly construed, plays a critical role in American history as a state of exception where anything could befall enslaved blacks.

This chapter charts a straightforward course as I bring to mind the issues and significance of defined space, or of the "void," as Edith Wyschogrod would prompt us to consider, as a place where the form of black religiosity later described in this work is concocted. Space, as used here, is understood as that physical environment where socio-political life is situated in certain ways. I draw attention to confinement in the form of the overriding idea of a macabre arena of oppression to give attention to the graveness of the plight of the subjugated bodies within this sort of confinement. In the coming chapters I consider the culture, creative expression, and rebellion that grows out of these confined spaces through religious experience. My current task reveals the nature of treatment within these spaces. I hold that these spaces also offer a place for cultural expression that is inextricably tied to confinement. These spaces are indeed unique and, as we shall see, function within and without political "order." They may be considered at once legally ordained and non-Constitutional.

Accordingly, this chapter progresses toward an unpacking of these spaces by first drawing attention to the function and/or truncation of law and juridical order within them. By way of a brief assessment of the primary legal document of the land, the U.S.
Constitution, I will emphasize the idea of sovereignty with regard to state’s rights and the legality of the “special” confinement of the arena of oppression. Therefore, I will query the idea of state of exception interchangeably with my shorthand phrase of the *macabre arena* in relation to black bodily maltreatment in the antebellum south. Ultimately I argue that this macabre arena takes up a unique space in North American historical consciousness. In so doing, this unique spatiality confines principles of law and juridical order to the desires of the planter class. Further, this form of recalculation or manipulation of law structures the nature of physical and social existence. The carrying out of planter class law, then, is done within hidden spaces, arenas of death, in the form of the plantation. In posturing such an argument I place emphasis on the antebellum South as the representative region where these spaces could exist. In fact, I may extend the argument by stating that the macabre arena is in fact representative of the entire antebellum South, where the sanctioning of the activities performed within these spaces is clearly at hand. Within these macabre arenas the sovereign class has the luxury of free exertion of power, with little to no restriction, even if moral juridical order would dictate otherwise.⁴

**On the State of Exception and Compression of “law”**

The current analysis considers the significance of separate space or spaces in the form of antebellum South slave plantations and the South in general, where sinister deeds take play. What we are dealing with is not simply a hidden place that the public cannot seem to find. Rather, and more heinous, is the existence of places whose existence is

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⁴ It should be noted that my work on this antebellum state of exception in confined to an analysis of plantation existence in the South.
known or at least acknowledged by the broader society and are allowed to function outside of general forms of juridical order or "moral" law. Juridical order as I am using it may best be seen as the administration of law in the maintenance social order and/or the establishment of social justice. My concern with these separate spaces, these zones of indistinction, as it were, is essentially two-fold: (1) with the significance of its existence at all in light of moral law and juridical order, and (2) with what happens to human bodies and identities within these confined spaces.

Edith Wyschogrod speaks of a cataclysm that represents a void only exposed through the event of the mass annihilation of persons within ever more compressed time frames—it is indescribable yet constitutes a unique moment in time. These concomitant realities, at once unknowable and taking up historical space as a "verifiable" happening, make the cataclysm elusive. We are forced to reckon with the cataclysm because we seek understanding about those silenced and driven to the fringes of society, even those annihilated through extreme suffering. This space of "unknown" history is important because the human story resides there, lurking within the shadows. The cataclysm's weight is a force field from which the investigator of any place or period, any social, political, economic, or cultural conformation cannot escape for it purely and simply demands that one speaks out of that non-place. I take interest in this so-called non-place because of its significance as a non-challenged reality where too often the unthinkable happened. Therefore, even though this non-place is only designated so because it is hidden in the fragments of history, the point here is that it did exist as a place. The problem affecting the investigator in finding out what happened within this zone is partly

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6 Ibid., 18.
the problem of peering in it to see what was going on when a given event was taking place in “real-time.” In this sense, the cataclysm isn’t solely a problem in unearthing historical reality, it also hides reality as it is happening. I find this idea to be the main issue and challenge to the idea of space. To briefly illustrate this line of thought I briefly turn to a discussion of the concentration camp as a backdrop to understanding the way I will later frame the plantation.

The Corporeal Connection of the Concentration Camp & the Plantation

I mark the concentration camp as illustrative significant in that it prompts us to account first-hand particular mode of corporeal corraling. In this way, within the camp bodies are strategically isolated from the outside world, yet that world affects various facets of the camp system and structure. More than this, the outside world functions as a point of reference for those held in captivity. Reflection on life more fully lived create spaces wherein confined bodies seek to usher in previous social realities. In this way, the outside world functioned as a power source in complicity with the mechanism of terror—but simultaneously it creates diverse frames of reference that helped to determine the odds for defense in the broadest meaning of the word.\(^7\) While I will make the case for specific efforts by oppressed blacks to determine for themselves the odds of their own defense in part two of this work, I make mention of it now to bring to light the complex and dialectical ethos that also existed within confined space.

I fully acknowledge that Agamben’s investigation of the significance of the camp in an analysis of sovereign power only takes me so far. That is to say, a major difference

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exists between the concentration camp and the plantation. I may frame the difference this way: the camp was created and set aside for complete annihilation of subjugated bodies. Even where labor is sought from these bodies, it is done for the purpose of hastening the destruction of bodies. In other cases, bodies were brought into the camps and sent directly to gas chambers. Conversely, the plantation required financial gain from black bodies. Even where there existed cases of extreme labor, where bodies were broken and sometimes destroyed, such examples prevailed in part due to overuse rather than consumption with the primary goal of utter destruction.

Yet, important connections remain between the two: (1) those who suffered as captives in either case were limited in large part by isolation from general society, living with the catalyst of the void; (2) within such a void any atrocity could take place; and (3) bodies were broken and consumed according to the whims of the sovereign class. Thus, in both cases, established authority of the sovereign was paramount. In terms of Nazi Germany, the propaganda, laid out over several years leading up to the concentration camps, authority was established among the people of Germany first. In the end, recognition of national and racial superiority entailed the obligation to exterminate "inferior" races and nations. Theologian Beverly Mitchell also offers a helpful connection between these two socio-historical realities. She frames an argument that places primary focus on the issue of stripped human dignity between these separate groups.

In the book, *Plantations and Death Camps: Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity*, Mitchell sets as her foremost to demonstrate "that black slavery and the Jewish Holocaust reveal a common humanity in which human dignity and human defacement are

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8 Ibid., 9.
both theological and political realities."\(^9\) Her book assesses this sordid space in terms of what it means to be Christian in light of Judeo-Christian perspective. Her project thus connects this maltreatment in the form of defacement to moral sin. Accordingly, cast as "sin," where one act against God is in theory no greater or worse than another, the range of acts that can be classified as defacement extends from the humiliating snub of being treated as invisible by the clerk in a store to genocide.\(^10\) The idea here is placed on the act of rendering a person or people invisible or inconsequential. In this sense, it is immaterial that black slaves were meant to be physically maintained as "tool" of labor versus Jews being summarily exterminated upon arriving to the camp, these merely function as ranges of defacement.

Perhaps the most prominent and, as we will later see for my work, important feature of this defacement is its connection to death. Mitchell holds that expressions of defacement on the communal level "became embedded in the economic, social, and political systems and structures of their respective societies. They became ideologies of death. The nature of this death was sometimes physical, sometimes spiritual, but always psychical."\(^11\) Ideology within her purview represents the view of how things should be, without reference to meaning or value. Ideology exists separate and outside of value systems. Accordingly, we might conclude that the idea of death permeates the consciousness of the oppressor because from their perspective, that is how things should be. I will extend this argument a bit when I consider the pervasiveness of death within the black slave experience. From my respective, all facets of slave experience reveal


\(^10\) Ibid., 51.

\(^11\) Ibid., 88.
death, whether social or physical, for the purpose of granting life to the planter and
sovereign classes. This “life” comes in the form of the fruits of the labor granted by and
gained from slaves. As we will see then, slave lives are sacrificed in an odd way. This
sacrifice is not one that is taken up by the slave, nor does it function in propitiation for
something that would benefit the slave or broader slave community. Rather, this odd
sacrifice is only a sacrifice in the sense that the sacred nature of these black bodies is
solely connected to the reality that they can be killed without the possibility of social or
political remedy.

As a “state” within the state, the camp eternally functions as an odd place of
exception. Odd in that the rights granted to the citizenry, as with any state, are
principally parcelled out according to the will of the sovereign, by the sovereign, and for
principal gain of the sovereign, without fear of retribution of juridical response.
Moreover, even if a moral “code” of behavior is evident within the camp, such codes are
arbitrarily established and carried out by those in sovereign authority. Therefore, the
chance of true social balance is nil. Thus, the nexus between the camp and the state of
exception is unbreakable. As Agamben figures it, the camp is the space that is opened
when the state of exception begins to become the rule.\textsuperscript{12} I find utility in this connection
for conceiving of the plantation.

What Agamben does not say but I would offer is that the state of exception
becomes an overarching paradigm for sovereign will to power and is thus applicable to
various social situations. In this sense, I would hold that the state of exception is a
malleable space, one that both sets the tone for how we understand history while at the

\textsuperscript{12} Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}, 168.
same time isn’t connected to any particular historical setting. In this sense, the will to impose power upon a despised group is a reverberating social phenomenon. In the study of social arrangements wherein one group is “placed” or fixed and ultimately misused by a sovereign group, the idea of law and order is always at odds with the same ideas as they function within culture and society in general. In the end I am acknowledging a random move away from the authority of larger state order so that a segment of state authority can see its political desires come to pass. For this reason social formation and destruction is at its core political. Yet, the irony is that in some way the segmented state of exception invariably represents larger state order in ultimate desire. This assessment bespeaks a hidden working together between two supposed separate entities. What creates dread for the subjugated in such a structure, whether on the macro or micro level, is the arbitrary nature the sovereign’s deployment of dreadful acts, whether in or out of the state of exception. The state of exception simply represents that area where the larger state can relinquish portions of its moral conscious for the purpose of meeting its own requirements. Within the camp, then, the state of exception, which was essentially a temporary suspension of the rule of law on the basis of a factual state of danger, is now given a permanent spatial arrangement, which as such nevertheless remains outside the normal order.\(^{13}\)

Evident by now is the central paradox of these separate and cordoned off spaces functioning within the concept of the state of exception. Agamben discloses that what we are speaking of “is a piece of land placed outside normal juridical order, but it is nevertheless not simply an external space. What is excluded in the camp is, according to the etymological sense on the term ‘exception’ (\textit{ex-capere}), \textit{taken outside}, included

\(^{13}\) Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}, 169.
through its own exclusion."\textsuperscript{14} What becomes of the camp and plantation is what may appropriately be considered a restructuring to juridical order. What point am I driving home here? A new distinct mode of law and "appropriate" practices of morality are the standard for these separate spaces. Accordingly, this often truncated moral-juridical order, as is the state of exception itself, is variable. The variable nature of this disconnected yet connected state establishes laws that others in the larger state would or could never adhere to. These are totalitarian states in the truest sense given that the sovereign controls every mode of society and restricts the movement of the subjugated (Homo Sacer).

So, in the context of the antebellum South, when the subjects get out of hand, over and above their utility within the chattel slave system, they are merely cast off, sometimes scapegoated, or killed. Ironically, these subjugated bodies, by nature of their existence within separated social system, are already cast offs. I then promulgate the notion that these bodies are \textit{double}-cast offs. In light of this double subjection, the power of the sovereign functions fully in the idea advanced in the last chapter, \textit{corporeal constriction}. This form of social and physical coiling renders these bodies, oddly situated, easy prey for arbitrary and authoritative maiming, killing, and utter extermination. Thus, within the antebellum South and resulting plantation system, inextricably tied here to the state of exception as the place I would like to refer to as the boa's macabre arena, priority is placed on the sovereign ability to freely exterminate bodies and identities.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
The Significance of Law & Suspension of Juridical Order in The Antebellum South

I have given quite a bit of attention to the ways in which law and juridical order play a role in the existence of the camp. Questions surrounding the enforcement of law only begin this portion of the inquiry. It also requires answers that bring to light what laws, if any, are being enforced at all within the state of exception. The enforcement of law is tied to suspension of juridical order for the sovereign within the state of exception. Yet, paradoxically in the establishment a form of law within the state of exception some form of order remains, even if it is not the juridical order that governs the larger state. What is offered in the place of juridical order for all “states” of society is a problematic form of law for the subjugated that functions with little deference to certain laws outside of the state of exception. This bracketing of certain laws, such as those guaranteeing citizenship rights or justice in the courts, merely cloaks the true thrust behind the state of exception—that its very existence requires forms of law be put in place to secure the fullest use of sovereignty.

One example comes from an account of a free black named Solomon Northup in 1853 Louisiana. Solomon was sold into slavery, though free, by a Mr. Burch to a planter named Eppes. While in slavery he faced extreme brutality at the hands of Mr. Eppes and was forced to “drive” and brutalize slave girls at Mr. Eppes’ command. Solomon eventually came into the care of Mr. Northup, who represented Solomon in court against Burch some time later. The verdict in the proceedings held the following: “By the laws of Louisiana no man can be punished for having sold Solomon into slavery wrongfully... because he was bought without the knowledge that he was a free citizen.”

cases, law, to the extent it could be established or interpreted on behalf of blacks in the antebellum South, came down on the side of these bodies being seen as chattel, even if later uncovered that they were legally free.

Indeed, what we face here is in part an issue of social classification. The fact that enslaved blacks were considered truncated humans is clear. The question becomes what type of legal rights could be gained by way of such a classification. Perhaps the issue of law, as some would hold, is strictly an issue of property. That is, due to their chattel status, blacks could not have conceived of themselves or been viewed by whites as socially or politically eligible to receive the benefits of legal right bestowed on the citizenry. However, I hold that this issue is more complex that this. With respect to this multifarious issue legal and critical race theorist Cheryl Harris makes a straightforward claim: “rights in property are contingent on, intertwined with, and conflated with race.”

If being black was sufficient for enslaveability, the issue of property in connection to race only served to cement the institutionalized nature of the slave system. Therefore, law ratified the making of black bodies into property on the plantation. Black bodies being “othered” in this way meant that even if free, they were subject to slave status through the purview and conflation of the separate issues of race and property.

But even with these ideas and practices firmly entrenched in the antebellum legal system and social consciousness, one difficulty remained. As Harris expresses it

Slavery produced a peculiar, mixed category of property and humanity—a hybrid with inherent instabilities that were reflected in its treatment and ratification by law. The dual and contradictory character of slaves as property and persons was exemplified in the Representation Clause of the Constitution.

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17 Ibid., 278.
Of course, the representation clause is also framed as the infamous tree-fifths doctrine embedded in the Constitution. What we face through this observation is messy at best. Within this peculiar and mixed dual category of human classification, the extent to which we emphasize the human element in the face of antebellum black bodily treatment becomes an important question. What does this human element meant when framed in terms of law? And if property was the dominant framing of black embodiment, how do we account for the strategic maneuvering employed by the likes of Abraham Lincoln to counter Constitutional provision and end slavery?

To move too quickly to hold that blacks were solely considered property is to (1) compress all of them as slaves in status and (2) that there was no authoritative ideology of the day that saw them otherwise. What existed was a complex array of opinions about the nature of this othered race of people, whether free or enslaved. Yet, I caution us against too swift a move to conclude that blacks were considered something other than property. When State v. Mann was decided by the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1830, it quickly set off a firestorm for its notorious holding with respect to the logic of slavery. The overriding assertion most drew from this decision was the idea that the slave-solely-as-property position had merit. The Mann holding was straightforward and clear: Slaveholders could assault their slaves without fear of prosecution. Thus, through such decisions in the courts and through the numerous slave codes, which began appearing as early as the 1680s, another law was at hand solidifying the slave in terms of property status.

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18 Slave codes included laws that governed the treatment of slaves, which maintained their deprivation. For example, under these laws slaves were not permitted to travel without permits, to own their own property, learn to read, assemble publicly, or own a weapon.
Even with laws faming the slaves' status as property, according to historian Mark Tushnet, the central problem for Southern legal thinkers was that they could not deny that slaves were human beings with minds of their own. In short, no matter how or what they were considered by the ruling planter class, slaves would inevitably assert their human will and desire. A primary example of the problematic nature of the slaves-as-property line of though most often surfaced when it came to slaves committing "crimes." To convict a slave's owner for the slave's crime was unfair to the owner and would not likely happen in a Southern court anyway. Conversely, to actually convict a slave of a crime through the juridical process would move him or her into a different status, one that could move them beyond the confinement of the chattel status. So, slaves could be treated as human beings when they committed a crime. In this way, slaves would be considered "reasonable" persons due to their ability to commit a crime. Therefore, the courts reasoned, murder was defined as killing a reasonable being, and the fact that slaves were liable for their own crimes showed that they were "reasonable beings" within the ordinary definition of murder. In theory, then, slaves not only be seen as human, but they could also, by way of that human status, take whites to court.

Outside of the inevitable twists and turns of trying to establish slaves as human under the law in light of the committing of crimes, the principle of the "law of slavery" remained problematic at best. The very idea of law conveys some notion of a practice consistent with some broad moral principles. On this view, there could be no such thing as a "law" of slavery, because slavery is inconsistent with the minimum moral

20 Ibid., 14.
requirements of law. Even still, the move from a slave law to any antebellum view of slaves at the very minimum as humans or even citizens required much maneuvering. However, moving toward the view of a black body as something other than property proved not to be an impossibility in the courts or in public perception.

What is at stake is not simply complacence or even acquiescence on behalf of the larger (governing) state outside of the exception. Rather, it is the complicit sanctioning of laws that seem to violate certain "laws of the land." As a result, the state of exception need not fear juridical sanction for acts committed in connection to their established "law." So, the task of inquiry into this form of law is to unearth the meaning(s) surrounding the establishment and carrying out of the law. That is, what does in mean to have the power of distinct "law" that need not fear juridical response for one's actions? We may do well to think in terms of this question in terms of a form of law that, as with all other laws, requires a certain type of conduct. Do we then strip law of its various components, whether moral or divine? If so, can law be seen in these ways within the confines of the state of exception? Again, seeking answers to these questions presupposes, for example, a moral good being sought in the construal and carrying out of a given law, even within the state of exception. In the end we find that the challenge within the state of exception may not be whether or not law exists of even if that "law" is moral, but rather the arbitrary nature of the law as carried out against the subjugated. Law, then, supercedes subjected life instead of protecting it. Yet, we face another task with respect to this issue of law—the pre-Civil War amended U.S. Constitution. The utilization of this important document of the country in connection with the state of

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exception offers instructional insights for understanding how such an exception could exist in the United States.

*On the U.S. Constitution: State’s Rights as the Justification of a Suppressed “law”?*

Accounting for the U.S. Constitution in general begins with observance of what for many amounted to “religious” adherence to this document. My current concern is with a more substantive consideration of the Constitution as a protector of human rights and securer of basic freedoms. More precisely, I locate a concern precisely with what the Constitution offered to African Americans during the antebellum period. Some would simply argue that it offered no freedoms to African Americans whatsoever. However, I may be compelled to argue that, because of its ambiguities regarding freedom and equality for all “people,” the Constitution during the antebellum period could simultaneously be used to argue for and against the state of exception. In cases where the suppression of law within the state of exception would normally have mobilized interpreters of the Constitution to stamp out wrong doing in the names of justice, the state’s rights clause also strengthened the state of exception and its practices by allowing freedoms to the U.S. South that often undercut the Constitution’s very principles.

James Madison, whose reverence for the Constitution was shared by many, offered chilling words that would resonate throughout the early United States government and the country as a whole. With respect to the personhood of slaves and the debates surrounding the issue, he offered the following “compromise” in The Federalist, No. 54:

“... Let the compromising expedient of the Constitution be mutually adopted, which regards them [slaves] as inhabitants, but as debased by servitude below the equal level of
free inhabitants, which regards the slave as divested of two fifths of the man.” Embedded in the very verbiage of this document in Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3, the slave was thence to evermore be considered three-fifths of a free white man. As seen above, even free blacks status as human citizens was conflated with slave status of blacks in general. The Constitution made clear that any black body considered worthy of bondage would be confined in the basis of a law that underscored the existence of a Southern antebellum state of exception:

No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.22

Without directly using the term “slavery,” this clause would be liberally interpreted for the purposes of maintaining state’s rights in dealing with bodies they felt were legitimately of chattel status. In a simple and brief statement, white supremacy and black degradation were institutionalized within the very framework of the government.23 To be sure, the groundwork was laid for a tenuous relationship between the Constitution and the enslaved blacks of the U.S. South.

With respect to the specific issue of slavery, the primary fruit of the state of exception in the U.S. South, the Constitution leaves later interpreters free to ponder its ambiguities with suspicion. Critical race and legal theorist Neil Gotanda goes as far as to argue that the U.S. Supreme Court, by way of an ideological stance that the Constitution is “color blind,” was in fact continually positioned to use it against blacks. Gotanda

22 U.S. Constitution, Article IV, Section 2, Clause 3.
holds that "the U.S. Supreme Court's use of color-blind constitutionalism—a collection of legal theme functioning as a racial ideology—fosters white racial domination." Thus, removing the conceptualization of color, which in theory would level the constitutional playing field, in fact pressed blacks further into demise along the lines of race. The result was an implicit adoption of a particular understanding of race as objective and immutable, which may be less obvious than legislative enactments, but is no less significant. On matters of race in connection to the Constitutional sanctioning to enslave, this "all is one" ideology makes in easy to mistreat those who may not be considered apart the Constitution's target audience. What happens in this scenario is that the concerns of a cordonned off groups is lost in the concern for the aggregate society. The problem is that its view of who or what that aggregate group is only seems to point to the dominant class and their concerns,

States were embroiled in fierce debate over the issue of slavery during the Constitution's framing. However, the growing sentiment to emancipate the slaves that had been detectable in many places, most notably Pennsylvania and Virginia, at the time the Constitution was being drafted and ratified soon dimmed. One of the major problems was its hushed, if not covert, response to the institution of slavery itself. The Constitution had left the lawfulness of slavery up to the separate states. It seems, then, that any assertion via logical interpretation that the Constitution secured the rights of the

25 Ibid., 262.
26 Kluger, Simple Justice, 34.
27 Ibid., 40.
black inhabitants of the United States would be far reaching at best. Accordingly, the groundwork for a state of exception or, the macabre arena of black oppression, was laid.

Leading up to the Civil War, President Lincoln found himself in a struggle to secure the Union. His use and interpretation of the Constitution during this time offers useful insights. Here I am centrally concerned with the sentiments, if any, covertly imbedded within the Constitution, which, in part, facilitated his landmark decision to emancipate the slaves. Considering this point, it is important to note that Lincoln was not a passionate freedom fighter or a believer in equality of all men of all races. He did not approve of blacks voting, or holding office, or intermarrying with whites, or being a party to any "normal" American functions of life. In fact, he favored their ultimate resettlement back to Africa. He subscribed to a notion of superior and inferior positions between races, with the superior position being reserved for whites. In other words, though his opposition to slavery as an institution was evident, his overriding concern was the preservation of the Union. Yet, to issue a command of manumission, he would absolutely need some stance upon which to base his decision of emancipation.

So, where was this illusive constitutional doctrine of emancipation to be found? Before considering this important question, let us briefly return to the happenings at the Federal Convention of 1787. I previously stated that the word slavery is nowhere to be found within the wording of the Constitution. According W.E.B. Du Bois, "Slavery occupied no prominent place in the Convention called to remedy the glaring defects of

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28 Ibid., 41.
29 Ibid.
the Confederation."\(^{30}\) Clearly, the result was a glaring omission of the word from the document. Yet, the reason slavery failed to occupy a prominent place for discussion is, to a degree, more tragic. The reason: certain delegates did not want to ruffle the feathers of the "pro" slavery delegates. Therefore, absent was any debate on the moral wrongs of institutionalized chattel slavery. In fact, regarding this issue, Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina bluntly declared that religion and humanity had nothing to do with the question (of slavery)—that it was a matter of "interest" alone.\(^{31}\) Not to be outdone, General C.C. Pinckney, also of South Carolina, contending that the importation of slaves would benefit the whole Union, remarked, "[t]he more slaves, the more produce."\(^{32}\) Therefore, as a matter of interest alone, the state representatives were, in a sense, allowed to exercise their own interests with respect to slavery in order to keep the peace.

With such opinions firmly rooted, the Constitution, while not overtly affirming the institution of chattel slavery, did so covertly. The settlement by the Convention, thence, constructed the following slave-trade article of the Constitution:

The Migration or Importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit, shall not be prohibited by the Congress prior to the Year one thousand eight hundred and eight, but a Tax or duty may be imposed on such Importation, not exceeding ten dollars for each Person.\(^{33}\)

This settlement of the slavery question brought out distinct differences of moral attitude toward the institution.\(^{34}\) However, even with these differences, the institution, in


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 56.

\(^{33}\) U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 9, Clause 1.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., 61.
conjunction with Madison’s “three-fifths doctrine,” facilitated, even encouraged,
quietism from many of the figures of ultimate authority in the country regarding slavery.

Most assuredly, these issues were well known to Lincoln as he assessed the
Constitution at the dawn of the Civil War. Lincoln had said that the Constitution was on
trial—that the issue was whether “government of the people, by the people, and for the
people, would perish from the earth.” Typified by the Supreme Court’s decision in
Dred Scott, slavery, while ambiguous in the constitutional language, was supported by
the Constitution. Yet, Taney’s opinion is widely agreed to be an intellectual disgrace.
Unlike earlier generations of Southerners, many during Lincoln’s day viewed slavery not
as a necessary evil but rather as a positive good. So, at the heart of the issue as
presented here is whether or not sentiments of the postbellum amendments, most notably
the Fourteenth Amendment, could have been found embedded within the Constitution
before the Civil War. And if they were to be found there, what are we to say about the
function of law and juridical order within the state of exception.

To be sure, the first Constitution was based on the principles of peoplehood as a
voluntary association, individual freedom, and republican elitism. The guiding premises
of the second (post Civil War) constitution were, in contrast, organic nationhood, equality
of all persons, and popular democracy. The original form of the Constitution stood as a
maximum expression of individual freedom, at least against the federal government.
Such liberty “allowed for the right of white people to assert themselves freely to seize

36 Ibid., 10.
37 Ibid., 11.
38 George P. Fletcher, Our Secret Constitution: How Lincoln Redefined American Democracy
and control the lives of certain other people known as Negroes." Yet, it seems that Lincoln's Gettysburg Address articulated themes that were to be found in later postbellum forms of the Constitution. Why, then, did Lincoln uphold these themes—that this nation was "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal"—as constitutional?

The answer to this question in my estimation lies in Lincoln's own personal convictions, which, it seems, he jettisoned into his interpretation of the Constitution. He made his moral condemnations of slavery clear. However, he never concluded that blacks could ever be socially or even legally equal to whites. Nevertheless, he held that blacks were "entitled to all the natural rights enumerated in the Declaration of Independence, the right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness." He later also addressed the constitutional status of slavery. The Framers, he claimed, regarded it as a necessary evil. Given the fact that the Constitution carefully avoided using the word slavery, Lincoln concludes, "the thing is hid away, in the constitution, just as an afflicted man hides away a wen or a cancer, which he dares not cut out at once, lest he bleed to death." Thus, for Lincoln, existing rights for slaves had to be respected but no extension of slavery could be tolerated.

According to historian James Oakes, Lincoln believed that race relations were regulated at three distinct levels: first, at the level of natural rights, which were promised by the Declaration of Independence and secured by the Constitution. On this level he asserted the equality of blacks and whites. Secondly, on the level of citizenship rights, he

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39 Ibid., 3.
40 Farber, Lincoln's Constitution, 11.
41 Ibid., 12.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
was cautiously egalitarian. But thirdly, on the level of State's rights Lincoln remained wed to the states in relation to slaves' legal rights. Accordingly, every concession he made toward racial prejudice occurred at this third level. Some argue that he conveniently hid behind his support of state's rights to maintain his stance of the natural inequality of blacks and whites. As it stood, Lincoln was somewhat willing to allow for citizen's rights and natural rights for blacks but also believed in state's rights, which allowed for racial discrimination. Thus, the debate about slaves as property was a political one, driven by the desire of a representative state and profit. To circumvent this issue of state's rights en route to the Emancipation Proclamation he pinpointed the issue of profit for labor as his entry point. Oakes summates this point well holding that Lincoln believed that everyone had a "right to rise" in this world, and when he spoke against slavery, he often said that all working people, black and white alike, had the right to the fruits of their labor.^{44}

If such ideas encouraged Lincoln to exercise his presidential power and issue the Emancipation Proclamation, what is to be said about what the broader southern planter class saw within the Constitution's hallowed words? What seems clear is that Constitutional "law," as ambiguous as it was on the issue of slavery, left a certain type of space within the state of exception allowing for an exertion of authoritative power in the name of state's rights. Thusly framed, state's rights extended across the Southern slaveholding states and, for my purposes, bound them together as a single state of exception. In form and root a macabre arena of black oppression was able to flourish not just through a suppression of law and juridical order, but also through a promulgation of

interpreted ideas about the lower socio-political state of African peoples. The Constitution enabled both. In this way, the broader state helped to create the space held by the macabre arenas of slavery.

Drawing upon the autonomy gained through the highest law of the land, whether literally granted or liberally interpreted, the state of exception commands prominent space in post-colonial culture and society. I have attempted the briefly outline some of the Constitution’s prominent features as a way of understanding the freedom with which sovereign authority subjects certain people to terror. Within the African American context this idea is framed herein as the boa’s macabre arena. That is to say, the planter class, who by constricting the movement and social advancement of black bodies, prepares them for consumption. This consumption is manifested in the dual forms of social and, if such action is required, physical death. The boa—that is, the one, whether an individual or a group, who through its social and political power, encircles and constricts the movement of the subjugated class for the purpose of consumption—enacts its distorted “law” within the confined space of the arena. The boa’s arena exists at all times in a state of the macabre in that it remains a horrifying experience for the subjugated, while continually pointing them to death on all sides. This formulation becomes the central focus of antebellum black experience in relation to geographic space and thus offers a basis for an understanding of how such extreme maltreatment could exist. I thus open this discussion with a historical account to illustrate the nature of the boa’s macabre arena.
Three Stories Among Tragic Stories: A Historical Account of the Macabre Arena

Former slave Moses Roper gives a sobering account of the heinousness of slave maltreatment within a state of exception. What he recalls is indicative of a form of law, functioning according the desires of the planter class. Roper recalls the fate of a slave preacher from Georgia. This man, whose name was George, fervently, and against his master’s wishes, preached to his fellow slaves on various themes from the Bible. Roper accounts that George’s master told him plainly that “if he continued his preaching to his fellow slaves, he would for the next offence give him 500 lashes.” 45 Upon hearing of his master’s demand for him to cease preaching the Gospel, George, knowing the risk associated with such an act, continued preaching to his slave congregation.

Eventually his master discovered the fact that George had continued preaching and George, “being dreadfully alarmed lest the threatened punishment should be carried into effect, fled across the Savannah River, and took shelter in the barn of a Mr. Garrison” near Greenville, S.C. This Mr. Garrison, upon finding George on his property, attempted to shoot him, to no avail. Thereafter Mr. Garrison chased down George and attempted to beat him with the butt of the rifle. In the ensuing struggle between the two men, George snatched the rifle from Mr. Garrison and struck Mr. Garrison with it in order to escape without being pursued. During this time a mob had formed, pursued and captured George, a preacher of Jesus Christ, transporting him to a jail in Greenville.

Upon hearing of what had transpired through the newspapers, George’s master traveled to Greenville to claim his property. He was required, however, to relinquish ownership of George and received $550 for his lost chattel. Not long after this

transpired, George, without a trial, was sent to be burned alive within a mile of the
courthouse, in front of a great number of witnesses, whites and slaves. The slaves had
been assembled to witness the horrible and unwarranted spectacle, from a twenty-mile
radius. Moses Roper reveals the manner in which George was lynched this way:

To a tree George was chained; the having been passed round his neck,
arms, and legs, to make him secure. The pen was then filled with shavings
and pine wood up to his neck. A considerable quantity of tar and
 turpentine was then poured over his head. The preparations having been
completed, the four corners of the pen were fired, and a miserable man
perished in the flames. 46

This early lynching account points us first to the nature and social placement of
antebellum black bodies. That is, even though they are valuable as chattel, these bodies
were aggressively constricted and obliterated if they were perceived to be insubordinate
or out of control. Yet, it is the seeming suspension of moral law and the lack of juridical
order on behalf of this black body that fuels the current discussion. What we find within
this legal blind spot is the unceremonious killing of black flesh, an issue I will fully take
up below.

No legal remedy or reconciliation could be found in the aftermath of George’s
lynching. Referencing a Mr. Breckinridge, who sought to corroborate this lynching
account after the fact, Mr. Roper claims that he (Mr. Breckinridge) “adverts to the
protection which the law is supposed to extend to the slave’s life.” Yet, Roper continues,
“whatever the law may be, no such protection is in reality enjoyed by a slave.” 47 As
such, within the framework of a state of exception, such a crime can be quietly carried
out and sanctioned by the “law.” Such an idea of law, of course, presupposes a certain

form of authority within that “state” with certain assumptions about politico-social order in place. Roper shares two more accounts to illustrate the nature of this social order and state of exception within the antebellum African American context.

Cementing his example of the lack of legal protection for slaves, Roper first highlights the experience of a West Florida slave who ran away from his master. Escaping from the plantation of his master, a planter named Sloane, this slave ended up on the property of another planter, Mr. Mauldin. Upon finding this slave on his property, Mr. Mauldin, without any other provocation, and with the slave retreating, he “deliberately aimed his rifle at him, and shot him dead.” Another white man saw this event unfold and Mr. Mauldin was ultimately tried. He was never punished for the act of committing murder.

In a separate case, Roper recalls a Mr. Bell (a member of the Methodist church), who would hire slaves for particular tasks of cultivating cotton. He hired a slave named Henry, who was owned by another planter. Henry, having failed to complete his required tasks on Saturday, and desiring to satisfy Mr. Bell with a job well done, and fearing punishment by beating, he finished the work of Sunday morning. Roper again offers a sobering report:

His [Henry’s] labour on the Sabbath was discovered by his master, and on the following day his master, as he said, “for violating the Sabbath,” tied him to a tree, and flogged him with his own hand, at intervals from eight in the morning until five o’clock in the evening. About six o’clock two white men, in the employ of Mr. Bell, pitying his wretched condition, untied him, and assisted him home on a horse, a distance of a mile. He was at this time in a state of great suffering and exhaustion. A short time after they had placed him in the kitchen they heard him groan heavily; Bell also heard him, and said, “I will go out and see what is the matter with the nigger.” He went, and found him breathing his last, the victim of his brutal treatment.\(^{48}\)

Treatment of this kind, wherein flesh is broken and ultimately fully consumed in death, requires a certain juridical climate. Such a climate requires the concoction of "laws" that are freely carried out by a few within the state of exception. Again, the exception as seen within these three accounts is exhibited by sovereign authority's freedom in harming black bodies, and the lack of regard for these "tools" of labor, even if it potentially requires the killer to take financial hit in losing a slave laborer. The resulting trial Henry's tormentor, Mr. Bell, only reinforces the idea of a separate law or lack of an extension of juridical order within the frame of the state of exception.

The trial against Mr. Bell progressed along a familiar pattern: he was "adjudged to pay the value of the slave he had destroyed." Unable to pay, a deal was struck where a wealthy planter, Mr. Connighim, paid the fine in return for an arrangement between he and Mr. Bell to care for the land on one of his estates. That is it. Such instances call our full attention to the inimitable nature of law and "special" juridical order within such a state of exception. Framed as the "Boa's Macabre Arena," I would like to assess this "place" as a symbol of control over black bodies—the coiled prey. Accordingly, I challenge notions of blacks as scapegoats and consider the primacy of the killing of these "death bound subjects."

**On the Presence of Another Hell on Earth: Death & the Boa's Macabre Arena**

What Roper's account of plantation life leads to certain questions. Firstly, how is it that black bodies could seemingly be so easily treated in such a malicious way? What type of climate could create such a "safe space," as it were, wherein even minimum
levels of moral aptitude and juridical order are supplanted for planter class maltreatment activity? Again, the present concern is not "why" such treatment existed but rather how this form of socio-political climate could exist for so long and, at least for lost of the period of slavery, basically unchecked. What is revealed herein is a realm, a place where this type of treatment is acceptable, even expected. Beyond what is expected, these realms or what I consider the macabre arena create distinct societies of blacks as death bound subjects. Concepts of law and justice with regard to black bodies are thus connected to a political arrangement wherein death is the primary tool used to maintain control of these corporeal realities within the macabre arena. As we will discuss in more depth below, death in this sense could also be revealed in the breaking of familial ties through the selling of family members to other plantations. What we face in the macabre arena is a landscape of pervasive death and a lab for the maintaining of social order.

On The Primacy of the Kill and the Legitimacy of Ritual Within the Arena

With juridical order structured in ways as to make it non-threatening to sovereign authority, the ultimate sentence of death could be freely carried out against antebellum blacks. This trajectory of death, then, should not be casually considered. This issue of death is indeed a political one according to Orlando Patterson. Accordingly, persons of African descent were racialized so as to be bound on all sides by death, either actual physical death or the commuted death sentence of cultural and social death, which could be revoked at any instant. 49 As prompted by Agamben's Homo Sacer, these subjects faced death on all sides based upon their political status as other, and within a realm

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where the “law” only acknowledged them as an exception. Provided such a socio-
political status by the sovereign confined and coiled these bodies in a chamber of death
that closed in tightly with every attempted act of agency.

When George acted on his own accord in opposition to his master’s wishes that he
refrain from preaching his egregious act was met with swift persecution. Forced to flee
George’s account reveals the grasp of this macabre arena. That is to say, even in
escaping death (at the hands of his master) death found him on the other side, in a
different state. Within this socio-political order, the “law” dictated the acceptance of the
ultimate consumption of George’s body by killing it. What this act established was a
social order for all, notably antebellum blacks, to observe and use as a macabre reminder
and point of reference regarding their social and potentially physical state of death. The
threat of physical death was pervasive and thus caused a great deal of dread in the lives of
the enslaved. What resulted was a certain level of dread, which reinforced the social
death of these bound subjects.

Important to note is the pre-judged nature of antebellum black-as-coiled-prey
existence. The socio-political milieu of death only serves to remind the observer of the
seeming absence of recognizable juridical order. Agamben observes this link of odd
sacredness and the death sentence that follows in this way:

The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a
crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will
not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian of law, in fact, it is
noted that “if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the
plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide.” This is why it is customary
for a bad or impure man to be called sacred.50

50 Agamben, Homo Sacer, 71.
This person is at once within juridical order but not eligible for its benefits. This political position as exception indicates how the isomorphic forces of a dual, social exclusion, the forces of religion or divine law and order and the forces of politics or human law and order press the sacred person.\textsuperscript{51} The mere fact that these forces are isomorphic, or similar in ways that blur the line between socio-political acceptance and exclusion speaks to the claimless state of blacks-as-coiled-prey. That is, without a basis for making a claim or demand of justice, of divine or even moral law, black bodies are merged into an encasement of death that sets the tone for their very existence and treatment.

This double imposition of confinement remains the preeminently sui generis structure or arrangement of death in North American history. On the surface it seems incomprehensible that bodies could be so easily and carelessly disposed of without, as Agamben asserts, “being stained by sacrilege.” This life is thus truncated. Agency is disposed of by sovereign authority within the corporeal constriction of the slave plantation and the U.S. South in general. The imposition of a death sentence is therefore made easy to carry out. Within this state of exception the flesh can be killed in a fashion that breeds a particular form of silence on both sides of the political sphere.\textsuperscript{52}

In that the extinguishing of black bodies did not solely come in the form of physical death, forms of social death would have included the freedom of the planter class to sell these bodies to other planters, thereby destroying the social networks created


\textsuperscript{52} I acknowledge here that in certain instances this experience of death encouraged rebellion and insurrection. Such responses lay outside the scope of this discussion partly because they do not comprise a significant number of slave responses to the slave experience. Yet, they are significant, as are the daily, often subtle, tactics of rebellion such as holding one’s head proudly upright when passing by whites on the roadside or even escaping for the plantation. All of these acts are seen as inextricably tied to the dread that the macabre arena conjures.
through fictive families and especially the separation of blood related families. The dread the perpetually preceded the socio-political structure of the day fully represents the nature of “the kill.” Bodies-as-chattel could be exchanged and procured in the shadows, outside of any watchful eyes, and with full autonomy. No spectacle was required in association with this form of social death, nor was there retribution to be had for the dispossessed. The one who may very well be exposed for all to see is also the one who, through its exposure, encourages the dominant class in their political power and discourages the subjugated class in their social death. These bodies are exposed only when the benefit of exposure suits the needs of the sovereign class. An idea of the primacy of the kill offers the best way to capture the public-not-public spectacle-non-spectacle nature of this obliteration. In short, the kill, not the spectacle, dominated this social framework. Killing, as we discussed in chapter two, becomes representative of the very existence of enslaved blacks. “Killing” relinquishes the sovereign class from responsibility for murder. The social status carried by the very position of being able to be killed and not sacrificed strips the killed subjects of any legal power to counter their own obliteration. Accordingly, anything goes within the “sacred” space of the macabre arena. The sovereign class is the only one with the power to manipulate how life is socially fixed within these defined spaces. So, what are we left with in this separated space? The freedom to consume bodies that are daily exposed to a myriad of death options uniquely positions these bodies as peculiar beings vis-à-vis law and juridical order. In the end, the macabre arena was the paramount event in U.S. history where the atrocities of one group over another were by necessity carried out within an indistinguishable void of history.
Conclusion

In this third chapter I placed emphasis on the suppression of law and juridical order within a given place. By way of several cultural-historical examples I offered a conclusion that the slave system within the chattel United States and state of exception exists. Within this confined space, which I name the macabre arena of racial oppression, black bodies are consumed according to the needs of the sovereign planter class. Fortified by what the U.S. Constitution simultaneously does and does not say about the institution of slavery, the macabre arena lasts and remains vibrant as long as the Constitutional principles and freedoms of state’s rights are maintained. What results for enslaved blacks was a double-sentence of death, where even if physical death is forfeited, social death is in perpetual motion. From this geographic setting and based on the harsh treatment discussed in chapter two, blacks labored to look at life outside of the void. In the chapters that follow I attempt to make sense of their labor to reconfigure themselves as whole people through a distinct religious expression and experience that grows out of this extreme maltreatment.
Chapter Four

Self-Amending as a Religious Task: Seeking Out the “Dark” Marker of Black Religion

...according to their respective Numbers, which shall be determined by adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years, and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.

—The U.S. Constitution, Article 1, Section 2, Clause 3

“...Be amended, five-fifths; be amended, five-fifths human....”

—“Pops”

Article 1 of the U.S. Constitution sets forth as its principle task establishing the manner of election and qualifications of members of each House. Ultimately, it establishes limits on federal and state legislative powers. The population of a state originally included all “free persons”, three-fifths of “other persons” (slaves) and excluded untaxed Native Americans. What stands out is that the social status of slaves was the only one compromised by this arrangement. Whether its intention was simply to limit the political power of slave-holding states by reducing their share of the House of Representatives or something more sinister, such a clause surely contributed to the perception and resulting institutionalized maltreatment of African Americans.

In chapter four our focus shifts from the historical, social, and political realities of the antebellum black embodied experience toward the beginnings of a theory of black
religious experience. In short, this chapter’s efforts will be to consider the social realities discussed in the previous two chapters as an ever-present constraint on the advancement and full realization of black bodies. Yet, the shift in emphasis considers as its basis the second epigraph in that it entails the form and posture of wrestling with lived reality and active engagement to secure a new and better lot in life. Taken from the song, “It’s Your World” on rapper Common’s CD simply entitled Be, the featured guest on the song, “Pops,” poetically calls for the least of these of the black community to work toward being fully human. Here we observe a direct counter of the political/social mindset behind the three-fifths doctrine that in some ways still has a residual negative effect on our society and culture.

While the last two chapters will identify a hermeneutical approach to the study of (chapter 5) and an essential function and activity of black religion (chapter 6), this chapter deploys theory of the religious desire among oppressed blacks—the amending of the self—as well as the resulting look or manifestation of black religion—the “dark” marker. I will argue in depth that the signifying dark marker of black religion is embodied in the observable signifier that is both metaphor and physical manifestation—representative of a *liberated human being affixed to a divine victor* over evil. Within this framing, black life is amended and re-presented in a more desirable and palpable way.

**Construing a Religious Definition**

Several thinkers have offered theories of religion that are presently useful. Take for instance Durkhiem’s definition of religion, which states that religion is “a system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is, things set apart and forbidden—
beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.\textsuperscript{1} The communal nature of Durkheim's definition is indeed important for an understanding of the way Christianity was practiced by African Americans within the context of suffering and oppression during the antebellum period.

In addition to Durkheim's definition I advance two additional and equally important definitions for our consideration—Charles Long, a historian of religions, and then religious scholar and theologian Anthony Pinn. For Long's purposes, "religion means orientation—orientation in the ultimate sense, that is, how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world."\textsuperscript{2} While biblical Christianity as an orientation will be the language through which we shall give meaning to religion in this dissertation, Long speaks of religion more generally among oppressed peoples. For him, the religion of any people is more than a structure of thought; it encompasses their experiences, expressions, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms.\textsuperscript{3} Religion in this sense is utilized to aid a signified group in countering negatively constructed social meanings associated with imposed racism. Those who have the power of cultural signification have created the cultural reality of blacks in the United States—and the range of this power extends to the language of politics, social structures, and cultural reality.\textsuperscript{4} So, we will consider the juxtaposition of being signified upon by another and finding one's own significance through religion, which works to dispel the original signification.

\textsuperscript{1} Emile Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life...
\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
Anthony Pinn adds to this perception of religion by arguing that at its core black religion is the “quest for complex subjectivity,” and “a desire or feeling for more life meaning.” Of course, an understanding of religion in these terms does not limit it to a single tradition—a point Pinn makes clear in his work. Pinn’s contribution to the understanding of the nature of religion harmonizes with Long’s definition. That is, Pinn calls for an understand of black religion’s basic structure as entailing a push or desire for “fullness.” So in this sense complex subjectivity equals a healthy self-concept that works to reshape history. Hence religious experience entails a human response to a crisis of identity (or being signified upon), and it is the crisis of identity that constitutes the dilemma of ultimacy and meaning.

With these considerations of religion forming our backdrop, this chapter will also make use of Durkheim’s theory of the totem. For Durkheim the totem functions not merely by name but also as emblem, a “coat-of-arms.” It can function as a name of significance or as an emblem marking the existence of the clan. The totem itself is the symbol of the “divine,” rather than an appeasement of the divine through atonement practices. Among the tribe the totem takes the form of a system of thought governing the body. This chapter will establish what, if at all, the totem of black religion might be in light of our working definitions of religion. I continue to account for the social placement of antebellum black bodies and, as a result, the sociological structure of black religiosity in the face of adversity. This type of social placement gives rise to a need for a certain emphasis and character of black religion.

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
Amending the Self as a Religious Groundwork

The idea of self-amending—that is, re-presenting one’s self in a different form or general way of being in the world⁸—begins with a general concern for that self. The root element of this perpetual move toward self-amending begins with a certain type of desire for that self. Perhaps this desire, as it were, is best described as an inner thrust of the self, seeking a desired fullness of life. This task boils down to an existential pursuit of something better than the hand that has been dealt in one’s social reality. The pursuit is particular in goal and required outcomes, but variable in methods of attainment and even final manifestation. Critical theorist Michel Foucault appropriately guides us through a clearer understanding of this process, requiring an ethical perspective to be affixed to the self-amending process. For him an ethical self-care is clearly exhibited in human existence.

Foucault’s Ethics in the Self-Response

Michel Foucault’s analysis of ethics as the ultimate and functional concern for the self is often associated with his extensive work on sexuality. However, this work also extends toward a concern with the care of self as a general practice—one that seeks responsively and aggressively to maintain a healthy state of “being.” He holds that

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⁸ Here I am influenced by Martin Heidegger’s project in Being and Time as largely a quest for a fundamental ontology. What we are able to apprehend about being and life in general comes by way of an analysis of what he terms Dasein—literally, being there. Dasein’s being is found and, to the extent it can be, comprehended in relation to the world around it, including other entities, objects, and things. This being is considered a priori in a state of Being-in-the-World. Yet, conceiving of it (in essence) requires some labor. And so a hermeneutics of Dasein is performed, the basis of which is tied to contextual formulations of history, time, and space. See Martin Heidegger, Being and Time (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) and Pathmarks (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
There are also possible differences in the forms of elaboration, of ethical work that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behavior.⁹

Our concerns center themselves on the care of self as a collective or group project, which harmonizes with the goal of his aggregate work. The term ethics, as posited for our consideration has little to do with subscribing to or following a set of societal rules and regulations. On the contrary, as Foucault indicates above, this ethical practice endeavors to transform the self—its aspirations, its desires, its goals, its movements, and its general autonomy. Indeed, there is a pleasurable intent or desired end at the core of this process, which is seen as a legitimate goal of life in general.

Foucault offers a study on the human subject in relationship to what he terms "truth games." The word "game" as used here should not be understood in a conventional way. Foucault cites, "When I say 'game,' I mean a set of rules by which truth is produced. It is not a game in the sense of amusement; it is a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rules or procedure, may be considered valid or invalid, winning or losing."¹⁰ So the issue becomes who imposes this truth. What is more, what is included within this truth becomes extremely important to the subject who may, for his or her own livelihood, need to circumvent or counter this truth in order to establish their own identity.

Foucault conceives a problem within the relationship between the subject and games of truth from the standpoint of coercive practices. Therefore, the practice of [reforming or reestablishing] the self stands as an oppositional practice to the games of

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truth. Inherent in the opposition is a practice of self-formation (our understanding of
amending) of the subject. It is similar to an ascetic practice, not in the sense of a moral
renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop
and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being.\textsuperscript{11} So this form of asceticism,
or self-denial, is associated with a denial of whatever seeks to limit the potential of the
self. When performed on the self this form of asceticism seeks to replace any intent to
limit the subject with transformative potential of the subject.

Action is associated with this effort to (re) establish the self, that is, one’s identity.
In the case of the subjugated, an ethical pursuit is commenced when the memory of
previous pleasure takes root in their collective consciousness. This recollection takes
place during oppression. This starting point of ethical concern for the self impresses
upon the subject to, in essence, reestablish the old, the good, the desirable, the healthy,
and the worthwhile. It represents life in its fullest sense.

The subject’s position is one of labor against hegemonic forces (political, sexual,
or otherwise). Speaking of the historical outgrowth of this form of ethics Foucault asserts
that, “it was not a strengthening of public authority that accounted for the development of
that rigorous ethics, but rather a weakening of the political and social framework within
which the lives of individuals used to unfold.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, as with Hellenistic and Roman
cultures, the importance of the ontological aspects of human existence is promoted. As
political and social structures of authority are weakened, whether or not in a literal or
tangible sense, the subject seeks an alternative to a pervasive imposition of power.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 282.
\textsuperscript{12} Michel Foucault, \textit{History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of Self} (New York: Pantheon Books,
1986), 41.
The basic underpinnings for Foucault’s form of ethics are: an individualistic attitude, characterized by the absolute value attributed to the individual in his or her singularity and by the degree of independence conceded them vis-à-vis the group to which they belong and the institutions to which they are answerable. Furthermore, this form of ethics, as Foucault maintains, “considers the intensity of the relations to self, that is, of the forms in which one is called upon to take oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action, so as to transform, correct, and purity oneself, and find salvation.”¹³ Emphasis is placed on the culminating practice of taking “oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of actions” in that this implies a surveying of the landscape wherein one finds him or herself. By surveying the landscape the subject (the signified) confronts the reality of subjugation with the intent to change that reality. Now, it is important to note here that this action does not seem to imply a total usurpation of hegemonic authority. There is no overthrow of the oppressor. Rather, we find fertile soil for the cultivation of a new being within the confines of the political or social structure in which the subject finds his or herself. As a result, the “salvation” one finds, strictly speaking, transforms and purifies the self spiritually, emotionally, psychologically, and ontologically. In short, although physical freedom that results in an overthrow of authority is not established, there are limitless bounds to the renewed spirit. As utilized for the purposes of this study, Foucault’s themes of liberation and power are captured as principle elements of these ethical practices.

Foucauldian Liberation

¹³ Ibid., 42.
The care of the self is a process of securing liberation in connection with *practices* of freedom. Foucault was somewhat suspicious of the notion of liberation.\textsuperscript{14} Speaking of his reservation on the subject he exclaims this wariness, "because if [liberation] is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression."\textsuperscript{15} In a sense what results is liberation run amok. In short, for Foucault, structural limits are always in play no matter what free action one engages in. Yet, people who reveal any viewable ostensible illumination of liberation tend to be those of privilege. At the same time, they potentially stifle another's liberative actions. Accordingly, with respect to the African American plight, "mechanisms of repression" were in place, giving rise to exhaustive actions of liberation by those in authority, performed against those of lower social status. Among these lower classes Foucault requires what he calls the "practice of freedom." Practices of freedom facilitate and reveal a state of liberation. Such practices then exhibit liberation itself as opposed to a mere desire for liberation.

Instances exist wherein liberation itself and the struggle for it are indispensable for the practice of freedom.\textsuperscript{16} But defining the practice in and of itself seems a bit challenging. On this point, Foucault posits, "with regard to sexuality, it is obvious that it is by liberating our desire that we will learn to conduct ourselves ethically in pleasure relationships with others."\textsuperscript{17} So, ethics itself is a practice of freedom and freedom

\textsuperscript{14} See Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Ethics*, 282.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 284.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
becomes an ontological condition of ethics. Hence, to perform Foucauldian ethics, one is automatically engaging in a practice of freedom on whatever level. Ethics is the form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection. These items work together to form a lifestyle wherein one’s free actions (practices) are readily observable. Yet, the fact remains that these observable practices of liberation face off against and respond to power dynamics at play in the self-care or amending process.

_Foucauldian Power_

It may be more appropriate to term this concept the _relations of power_. Foucault seems to stray away from a discussion of power from the standpoint of readymade models such as political structures, dominant social classes, or master-slave relations. Conversely, he endeavors to speak of power in human relationships, whether they involve verbal communication or amorous, institutional, or economic relationships. In this context, he is speaking of a relationship in which one person tries to control the conduct of the other. Philosopher John Caputo engages this notion advancing that Foucault, “clearly distinguishes the power that is exerted over material objects, for example, by means of instruments, from the power that individuals exert over other individuals, which is not power over things but power over freedom.” Freedom becomes a key element in understanding Foucauldian power constructs. These power relations are mobile and can be modified.

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., 291-92
The complexity in Foucault's form of power relations now begins to surface. That is, power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free.\(^{21}\) In a sense, there must be *action* and *reaction*. Therefore, this model must include some form of a practice of freedom on the part of the subjugated in order for power relations to exist. So far from excluding or reducing freedom, power over freedom implies resistance.\(^{22}\) Thus, there must be some degree of freedom on both sides. Foucault asserts:

"Even when the power relation is completely out of balance, when it can truly be claimed that one side has "total power" over the other, a power can be exercised over the other insofar as the other still has the option of killing himself...or another person. This means that in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all."\(^{23}\)

In this sense, power relations exist within the capacity of freedom (or, practices of freedom) being exercised. We might, therefore, consider that power, as religionist Henrique Pinto hypothesizes, comes from the bottom up (i.e., from the very depths of the social body).\(^{24}\) Consequently, I would argue that within these depths of the social body exists vibrant counter moves performed by the subjugated. Accordingly, Pinto states, 'power functions in the form of a capillary-like organism, it is never localized and in nobody's hands.'\(^{25}\) It is to be utilized for the benefit of the signifier or the signified individual benefit.

So, it seems from this construction that where there is power there exists resistance. If subordination is reduced to total impotence, through the domination or

\(^{21}\) Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Ethics*, 292.
\(^{22}\) Caputo, "On Not Knowing Who We Are," 131.
\(^{23}\) Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Ethics*, 292.
\(^{24}\) Henrique Pinto, *Foucault, Christianity and Interfaith Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 59.
\(^{25}\) Ibid., 60
submission of the adversaries, then relations of power automatically cease to exist.²⁶ Dangerous for Foucault is the idea of domination because it was evil and ought be avoided. Hence, the practice of the self, that, according to Foucault, is what allows the subject to play these games of power, which weaken domination.

Thus far I have attempted to establish an undercurrent, an underpinning, or a back-story that points us toward a “black” religion. We previously took on Giorgio Agamben’s theory of the Homo Sacer, which, for our purposes, casts the historical African American as a socially despised “other,” existing “on the fringes of society” based upon the wielding of sovereign authority. As such, this authority is exerted at will within defined spaces, prohibiting the black body from full functionality as a free willed human being. Such a form of truncated agency within defined spaces gives rise to a certain type of experience, which, in turn, encourages a desire for a care of the self, or an establishment of a new or full personhood.

The work of Michel Foucault also forms an underpinning with regard to his form of “ethics” of the self. From this we attempted to establish that the subjugated life seeks to move away from the status of “bare life” into a qualified life position where freedom and social mobility exists, if possible, in equal proportion for blacks as with whites in the United States. While he neglects to unearth the ways in which the material body comports itself to ‘overcome,’ Foucault remains useful as a tool for establishing an inner spiritual posture of the human will to ‘become’ something more than it is. For my purposes this ethic is an essential part of the fabric of black religion, in part giving it a distinct thrust when one accounts for the black experience in the Unites States. The unfolding of a black religious life now begins to take shape.

²⁶ Ibid.
Focusing the Amending Process in the Black Religious Experience

The wounding of black bodies and souls by the planter class who has sovereign authority over their bodies necessitates a response. Accordingly, the risky process of amending the self as currently described presupposes a desire to be made whole. If, as Frantz Fanon alerts us, man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another man in order to be recognized by him, then self amending dubiously imposes its will on daily action when one face obliteration.\textsuperscript{27} In short, the one holding sway with sovereign authority remains the theme of the subjugated person’s actions until full recognition is established. In so doing, self-amending activity requires risky relinquishing of private space. In the last chapter we identified the issue of (private) space and its material link to suffering as a secondary backdrop to assessing black religious attempts to move beyond the void. Advancing this argument further we find that this activity compels one to project the damaged self so that others can observe the scars and adverse treatment of this commodified black body.

As English and cultural studies professor Karla Holloway asserts, these bodies are at once private and public.\textsuperscript{28} The black body in the context of this analysis is a private body read publicly as a text. This public spectacle living on the fringes (Agamben) is only “public” according to defined definitions offered by the sovereign. Privacy was afforded them within the void only according to the socio-political terms set by the sovereign. Thus, blacks must give up the “luxury” of the very privacy that allows whites

\textsuperscript{27} See Frantz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks} (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 216.
\textsuperscript{28} Dr. Holloway offers a rousing lecture on this subject wherein she identifies the extreme risks associated with changing one’s biopolitical status. Karla FC Holloway, "Private Bodies/Public Texts: The Spectacle of Narrative." Given at Rice University, Americas Colloquium lecture series, October 2007.
to flourish and dominate. In short, privacy within defined spaced is relinquished so that the story of "what really happening" can be told. This sort of putting one's business out there facilitates the process of amending and thus recasting the self. In the end full manifestation is seen when private space is redefined and then reestablished outside of sovereign control.

As a political game this moving outside the void to amend the self is a tricky enterprise. It was, of course constitutional jurisprudence that secured the language of three fifths human and it was the legal institution of slavery that was managed and sustained by a decision that the enslaved were not-quite-human. Thus, there remains a binding relationship of biopolitical and biolegal practices on brown and black persons whose bodies have always already been the subject of the specular.\textsuperscript{29} We are left attempting to grasp the slippery lines between legal and criminal, juridical order and arbitrarily established bio-political arrangements.

By now it should be clear that self-amending activity is in part a human centered process, revealing itself most clearly within the context of a labor to amend oneself to a status of five-fifths human. Thus, amending of self relates to human identity that flourishes most concretely outside of the void or zone of exception. Stepping outside the faux safety of the void two projections occur: the revealing of the warts of maltreatment and the casting of the self they desire to be. The latter process is the entry point to capturing the utility of religion. We now refocus our Foucault influenced understanding of self-amending on black responses to violence.

Theophus Smith and the Self-Amending Response to Victimized Violence

For Theophus Smith, religion in general offers the adherent curative tools to be used in response to oppression by way of violence. Theologian and religious theorist Robert Hamerton-Kelly in the Smith co-edited volume, Curing Violence, considers the Girardian (Rene Girard) construction of religion in the face of violence, which aid this analysis. According to Hamerton-Kelly, at the initial stage of contact with violence and oppression, the victim (subjugated) processes bad violence into good, disorder into order. Therefore, one finds, as we have elsewhere considered, a general impulse to overcome unpleasant experiences for the subjugated victim. However, to turn disorder into order in their experience, they beckon the Sacred as an amending aid. Hamerton-Kelly continues: “The center of the Sacred is the victim-become-god-by-the-double-transference. The double transference gives the Sacred a double valency of threat and promise corresponding to mimesis and surrogate victimage respectively.” Accordingly, the victims utilize a mimetic desire to take upon themselves Sacred power to transform a violent reality. Through the Sacred the double transference generates prohibition, ritual, and myth as the building blocks of cultural order. In short, it moves the victim toward the establishment of a new “self” within a cultural ethos and comfortable space. I highlight this notion of religion as the initial step to understanding Smith’s theory of African American religion and their engagement with the Bible.

The enslaved often used the transformative practice that included somehow compelling the intended ‘target’ to ‘experience’ a victims life and, thereby, side with his

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31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
struggle against violence. Here an ingenious representation of folk religious (conjurational) strategy is performed: to foster, exploit, and augment such a predisposition of white Americans so that they would be induced to respond and love as Christ did in the gospel accounts. The logic employed here reflects a synergy in which (1) a portrayal, representation, or dramatization of (2) a victimizer's scapegoating behavior, alongside (3) a victim’s imitation of Christ (4) induces, catalyzes, or augments the observer’s ability to identify with the latter and to dissociate himself from the former.33

With respect to this amending process and response to systematic violence, the Bible and its cultural connection to African Americans also becomes a critical consideration. Accordingly, New Testament and religious scholar Vincent Wimbush raises the following question: “How did African Americans come to this point of communicating so much to one another about one another and their views of the world in terms of the Bible—a text that the white dominants claimed to own?”34 This question indeed leads to several others but speaks to our current concerns. That is, the significance of the Bible becoming a primary text for life formation of people denied their own personhood by those with the political ability to make authoritative claims about this Sacred text. Yet, the Bible has been formative for African Americans in particular and sustaining ways in the face of poor treatment. Clearly, the enslaved were attracted to prophecies and stories that denounced social injustice and cast visions of social justice for all God’s people. This sort of biblical reading, according to Wimbush,

allowed black interpreters of the Bible to "create a circle—of social solidarity based upon entry into a language-world that was biblical." We have seen in our inquiry of Smith the layers of critical engagement employed by early African Americans to understand the ways in which they appropriated this Sacred text to secure healthy life options. Along similar lines, Wimbush sees early African Americans as endeavoring to gain the power to "crack the codes of the Bible" and also obtain "the power to negotiate, even overcome, the opposition of the world." 

Smith's theoretical perspectives regarding black biblical formations are concerned primarily with aesthetics, oral performance, religious language, and symbolism. To that end, he explores the significance of the religious formations and cultural materials of African Americans funneled through the concept of conjure—that is, the three interrelated activities of (1) invoking or summoning (up) a spirit; (2) to effect by way of using magical arts; and lastly (3) the summoning up of an image or an idea as an act of imagination. Black oral performances in particular may be described in terms of dualistic patterning involving reversals of meaning or signifying, and also "style switching" or the alternation of culture-specific codes. Cultural formations of this sort bespeak processes of reconstruction similar to Foucault's care of self as an ethical practice. However, there is also a unique form of practice at work here. Conjuring as a cultural practice operates covertly. The use of biblical figures to conjure culture involved a collective strategy to cloak, mask, or disguise conjurational operations by employing

36 Wimbush, The Bible and African Americans, 30.
37 Smith, Conjuring Culture, 5.
38 Ibid., 112.
approved religious content—namely biblical and Christian content.\textsuperscript{39} These tactics worked to ensure a safe space wherein religion could reach its greatest potential and have its desired effect in the lives of subjugated blacks.

According to Smith, "Black experience recapitulates biblical narrative."\textsuperscript{40} That is to say, the self-amending tactics utilized by blacks engaging the Bible as a conjuration book drew from its central ideas of hope and faith. Smith sees a remarkable convergence and correspondence between biblical accounts and the contemporary story of black America. He continues that, "[f]aith and reason together seek a comprehensible and a comprehensive explanation for the biblical shape of black experience."\textsuperscript{41} In short, then, faith works most effectively \textit{with} reason in response to oppression. These points are crucial to a fuller understanding of the scope of Smith's arguments raised in this study. There is no "blind faith" associated with the struggle for freedom in Smith's presentation. On the contrary, tactics as a result of an intellectual enterprise are put into action to confound the signifier/oppressor. Smith therefore assesses these cultural/religious practices among African Americans and simply describes (through phenomenology) and interprets (through hermeneutics) what he sees.

With respect to his allegiance to the notion of conjure, Smith holds that, "the African-derived spirituality of conjuration [should be] examined for its part in constituting the distinctiveness of Black religious expression in North America."\textsuperscript{42} Conjure should not be understood within this context as a literal practice but rather a style of praxis feeding black biblical formation and religious thought, an issue we will probe

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 115.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 6.
further in the next chapter with respect to its curative elements. Understood in terms of style biblical engagement, this form of religious praxis (or, practice in-concert-with-theory) has as its primary concern the care of the black self. Spoken more broadly and equally appropriately, it entails the care of the subjugated self. With these concerns fully touted, conjure and its relation to phenomena can constitute a source of intellectual fermentation involving considerations of magic, the supernatural, precognition, and imagination.

In a sense, Smith is concerned with the conjoining everyday experiential concepts of restoring the self with the ageless. In conjoining the everyday with the timeless and immemorial, biblical literature begins to shift from its proverbial form of discourse.\(^{43}\) In short, it begins to make the recognizable or common biblically into something broader, in a constructive or reconstructive sense, for African Americans. Smith adds that, “it (this shift) does so first by means of a hypostasis: the personification or reification of wisdom.”\(^{44}\) So then, the immemorial not only speaks biblical wisdom but also speaks contemporary wisdom that is sensible on contemporary fronts. Such wisdom reified becomes central to liberative African American language for the distinctive care of the black self.

From this connection results a nuanced black religious thought and culture in North America. It is, for Smith, black folk wisdom conjoined with the immemorial and the cosmos. The wisdom proficiencies of a folk ethos that is conjurational, and of a cosmic vision that is pharmacopeic (curative), feature the conjoining opposites in every

\(^{43}\) Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 142.
\(^{44}\) Ibid.
context of human experience. Consequently, what remains is a form of religious praxis that seeks essentially to re-set reality in a sort of transcendent fashion. This "resetting" of reality becomes a repeated process of counter-hegemonic engagement in which the black subjugated group struggles to gain liberation through a wielding of power. The terms "liberation" and "power" as used here (and as we have discovered with Foucault) are not meant to convey an absoluteness. That is to say, Smith does not conclude that through biblical formation and religious praxis that blacks attain an absolute form of liberation—that is, an outward viewable manifestation, which can be understood as a practice of freedom—or power. However, these acts of liberation and power are indeed curative in the sense that even under hegemonic forces of control (i.e., slavery or Jim Crowism), blacks were able to counter pain and suffering with refreshment that comes with religious contact.

It is, therefore, appropriate for us to conclude from Smith's work that for African Americans formative biblical contact secures for them a form of power. We speak here of metaphorically new understanding of the self. As such, this position creates a space wherein power relations can form. African Americans through a form of mimesis refigure themselves as biblical types. Through the reconfiguration of oneself transformative religious praxis, language, and thought develop. Smith asserts that the intention of this transformation of the self through literary-religious expressions is to induce material transformations of reality for enslaved people in America. In this way, the subject alters the fabricated reality constructed by the signifier or source of

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45 Ibid., 143.
46 Ibid., 147.
hegemonic authority. Although the authority is not literally usurped, the signification placed upon the subjugated can be obliterated.

So, this process proceeds in the following way: first, the Bible functions as an iconographic source of figures and incantations to be mimetically appropriated and replicated.\textsuperscript{47} Secondly, the subject extracts the available biblical data as a reformative tool for the purpose of redefining their reality. Thirdly, the subject implements the language, sentiments, constructions of fanciful reality (biblical folklore), and triumphal positions to “trump” current hegemonic significations. Lastly, the subject projects its own signification, which can be covert (for the purposes of protecting the subject), or overt (for the purposes of making a statement about the subject or encourage other subjects). It is important to consider what this final practice entails. Manipulating a surplus of meanings involves games of reinterpretation and counterinterpretation, as well as devices for subtly tricking, misleading, or outwitting others.\textsuperscript{48} This new signification empowers the subject.

\textit{Reconciling Thoughts on Self-Amending & Power Dynamics}

Here I bring together Smith and Foucault in terms of usable principle ideas. Our initial engagement must briefly examine self-maintenance and (re)formation as a general response to hegemony. We have observed in Foucault’s construction of ethics that there exists a form or type of asceticism, which seeks to replace any limits placed on the subject with transformative potential of the subject. This desire for transformation surfaces when the subject comes to grips with their constructed reality. This reality is

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 149.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 150.
often counter to their recollections of prior lived reality. On the other hand, this reality is
presented in a form that is counter-productive or destructive to the subject. The result, I
posit, is an internal, even innate, leaning toward a care and preservation of the self in
such circumstances.

We gain from Smith's analysis the idea of an inherent call and desire for the
preservation of the self by making use of the Bible as a tool to amend identity anew. In
this sense, the African American's engagement with the Bible is at the forefront of this
activity. In various instances, of course, certain slaves shared a recollection of the "way
things were." That is, they reflected on a time before bondage. However, an
overwhelming number of slaves, those born on the North American continent and into
slavery, such a recollection was only available through person-to-person sharing and
folklore. The Bible, as we have seen, offered the enslaved a prescription for
reenvisioning and hence transforming social reality. For them, biblical formation was
the basis for the care of the self.

As Foucault prompts us of the existence of a "technologies of the self, which
permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain
number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and a way of
being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity,
wisdom, perfection, or immortality." It seems therefore important to consider what the
subject (or subjects) is able to utilize outside of its own means and ways of responding.
This is not simply a collective of like minds sharing similar concerns and goals for the

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49 Smith, Conjuring Culture, 18.
self. Beyond this, they are bound by and encouraged toward an end that moves them toward a newly realized socio-religious and political position.

We accept this process as a collective perseverance in response to tyranny. Yet, an element of faith and hope activates and motivates this activity in particular ways and with certain ends in mind. The Bible, and all that is religiously and spiritually attached to it, takes the form of a prescriptive source book (this idea will be further dealt with in the next chapter as we further unpack black appropriation as an activity) aiding one in this process of amending the self. The Bible forms a curative and magical means of transforming reality. Ultimately, it is the Bible, working in tandem with human strivings and ingenuity, that aids in reforming the identity of a people denied personhood.

**Power**

I draw attention to this idea of power as a force that compels a people to move against the odds. Foucault holds that

Some movements are irreducible: those in which a single man, a group, a minority or a complete people asserts that it will no longer obey and risks its life before a power which is considered unjust. There is no power which is capable of making such a movement impossible.\(^{51}\)

Along this pattern, there is something inherent within the depths of the sufferer that allows them to respond in life affirming ways with power, with power. There exists action and reaction to the extent the subject is free to react in any way. Accordingly, for Foucault any counter measure exhibits power. The power authority exercises its will on the subjects, often in harmful ways. As we have seen, such an exertion of power produces a signification—a projected meaning—that the signified attempts to counter.

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We must also consider Foucault’s limits of power on the slave. That is, even though power surges from the bottom up, the slave seems to occupy a different, more limiting category. Returning to John Caputo we find that,

Slavery [for Foucault] is not power but constraint because in slavery the range of possibilities has been ‘saturated’, that is, determined to a specific outcome. Power is exerted only over beings capable of being recalcitrant and intransigent. Power implies freedom since without freedom power is just constraint or force. Power and freedom belong together agonistically, in continuing ‘agonism’, a struggle, in which there are winning and losing strategies, a victorious consolidation of power on the one hand or successful strategies against power on the other hand.\textsuperscript{52}

The power dynamics asserted by Caputo indeed limit Foucauldian constructions of power with respect to my principle considerations. However, I would make two assertions in response.

First, I contend that Caputo’s analysis of Foucault (and thus Foucault’s argument itself) does more to make the case that there in fact were power relations that existed during the antebellum period of slavery. In order for there to exist power the subjugated must be capable of defiance to authority. Historical accounts hold that slaves exhibited defiance against their lot in life. Notwithstanding the many unaccounted for everyday acts of defiance (i.e., purposed work slow downs or slave women refusing sex with slaveholders), the insurrections of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Gabriel Prosser give rise to the notion that slaves did have power. Therefore, an intense struggle is exhibited wherein certain strategies, although for the most part unsuccessful, were employed by slaves who desired full manumission.

Secondly, I would argue that this struggle to amend the self was vibrant among the slaves. One certainly cannot investigate insurrections without accounting for the

\textsuperscript{52} Caputo, “On Not Knowing Who We Are,” 130.
religious thought that fueled them. Therefore, I argue for religion (including thought and praxis) as a viable source that fuels and facilitates power relations between the master and slave. Through religion slaves secure a position of power. For our purposes this power source is facilitated through the slave’s use of the Bible. Referring to the Bible Smith argues compellingly that “[l]aw alone was insufficient as a social curative…. Another pharmaconic agent was needed to counter the toxicity of American law itself, as it became increasingly the medium of institutionalized racism and of routinized, systemic violence against black people.” 53 The Bible, with its empowering and curative prescriptions, becomes a power source in the face of a juridical system of law that had failed them. In this sense, the subject engages in “practices of freedom.” That is, even with the authoritative power structure firmly in control, black biblical formation draws on practices of faith exhibited through the black religious experience. These experiences, in turn, project the biblical narrative and could be considered a viable practice of freedom. Smith makes use of conjure as a style of religious thought and praxis that employs the transcendent for magical transformation in the process of caring for the self. Hence, the subject is imbued with a power that for some observers is nonsensical but is an effective means of countering hegemonic authority through an amending and thus amending of identity.

Liberation

The concept of liberation stands paramount in importance. According to black theologian James Cone, “the Jesus of the biblical and black traditions is not a theological concept but a liberating presence in the lives of the poor in their fight for dignity and

53 Smith, Conjuring Culture, 95.
worth.” To this extent, Cone, as with several other black theologians, points to the liberative work of Jesus Christ on the cross as proof that God seeks liberation for God’s people, most notably the oppressed. He continues, “in the experience of the cross and resurrection, we know not only that black suffering is wrong but that it has been overcome in Jesus Christ. This faith in Jesus’ victory over suffering is a once-for-all event of liberation.” Hence, Cone’s understanding of liberation offers a usable backdrop as well as a certain level of tension for our present purposes.

First and second-generation black theologians, to be sure, have influenced Smith. He himself locates an interest in black religion in part on theological grounds. As a result, a convergence of the Smith and Foucault’s constructs of liberation can be tricky. As previously discussed, Foucault is leery of the term liberation because for him it cannot exist in the truest sense among the subjugated. More specifically, slaves cannot reveal a viewable form of liberation because even with an exertion of power against hegemonic authority, there still exists no free range of motion. In short, if the subject fails to exhibit “practices of freedom,” which allow full realization of subjective personhood, liberation cannot be claimed. Certainly, within this context one finds “practices of liberation” wherein the subjects engage in a mobilized effort to secure liberation, but the extent to which liberation is fully realized seems to be limited to a process rather than actualized liberation.

Smith’s use of a folk ethos that is conjuralional in its engagement with the biblical narrative beckons a form of transcendence that Foucault does not consider. This form of

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55 Ibid., 177.
56 See Smith, Conjuring Culture, ix.
praxis transcends and therefore resets reality for liberative means. The question even for Smith becomes whether or not these liberative means or strivings ever become lived and exhibited liberation or simply, at best, ostensible forms. Are there "practices of freedom" to be had in Smith's construction? Or, is there merit in the struggle toward liberation (even if identifiable liberation among the subjugated never materializes)?

Contributing unique and useful perspective regarding the merits of "striving" for liberation—even if never fully realized—we return to the work of Anthony Pinn. In what he terms an "Ethics of Perpetual Rebellion" Pinn reveals a system of ethical practices that accompanies his understanding of black religion.\(^{57}\) Important to this striving is the expressed impulse to engage culture with life-affirming activities. This process draws on multiple sensibilities—song, aesthetics, visual arts—for the sole purpose of positive movement toward a yet unknown end.

Within this ethics of perpetual rebellion is a continuing concern with liberation from dehumanization, but it is understood that struggle may not provide desired results.\(^{58}\) This position, however, should not be understood as acquiescence to one's plight as oppressed. Nor is this a defeatist stance that things will simply never change for the better. Rather, the importance in human action and the will to procure liberation is promoted, even if stifled by uncertainty. In the place of an outcome-driven system, Pinn's proposed ethical outlook locates success in the process.\(^{59}\) Offering further clarity on this line of thought Pinn states,

"[W]e continue to work toward liberation and maintain this effort because we have the potential to effect change, measuring the value of our work not in the product but in the process of struggle itself. Liberation is the

\(^{58}\) Ibid.
\(^{59}\) Ibid.
norm; perpetual rebellion is the process....Ethics in this sense is a commitment to rebellion, a rejection of reified and truncated identities, an endless process of struggle for something more.”

For some the uncertainty of an identifiable liberative outcome renders this fatalistic—outside of normative biblical constructions of ultimate victory through the work of Jesus Christ. Yet, I propound that Pinn’s perpetual rebellion harmonizes with Smith’s understanding of liberation. In this system of ethics, according to Pinn, “the goal of social activism, or struggle, is concerned with fostering space, broadly defined, in which we undertake the continual process of rethinking ourselves in light of community and within the context of the world.” In short, Pinn, as well as Smith sees the process of securing liberation as empowering, giving the subject hope within struggle.

The process of securing liberation incorporates a wielding of power. As we have seen, however, this exercise does not convey a full exhibition of liberation. Even in Smith’s analysis of the transcendent conjurational practices of black biblical formation, he stops short of showing the outward manifestations or full liberation. However, the acts of liberation remain substantive and curative in that they effectively counter pain and suffering, replacing them with a religious optimism and hope (by way of faith). Faith is not passed off as a hope lacking substance. The acts of liberation are themselves curative for the slave engaged in the struggle.

In consequence, amending and recasting a new identity becomes a norm that facilitates the beginnings of grasping black religion. But now we must consider what symbolizes this amended identity. Connected to this concern we inquire: what reminds these commodified black bodies that they are in fact something else, something more?

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60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 154.
The task of the final section of this chapter is to theorize such a question—the embodied symbol I proffer as the dark marker of black religion.

Establishing the “Dark” Marker of Black Religion

If religion in any way has the power to galvanize and forge community then it may be prudent to contend with the symbol or rallying point that binds them. In the case of antebellum enslaved blacks, community is indeed forged, often painfully, in the face of extreme hardship and human suffering. As such, this amending and forging activity, in relation to blacks religiously making sense of or attempting to reconcile their societal lot, prompts us to contend with yet another concern—the issue of theodicy. Sociologically, as Peter Berger expresses in his book *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion,* a certain sacred order of the cosmos “is reaffirmed, over and over again, in the face of chaos.”

Nowhere within established sacred order is faith most shaken than in the face of theodicy. Theological questioning asks what one can say about God in light of human suffering in the world? Such a question assumes a divine desire for

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justice and fairness in the world. Theodicy thus becomes a given religious group's response or reckoning with the issues of evil, suffering, or death. Theodicy gives a language for the justification of the actions of the divine. Taken together, the process of world constructing and theodical wrestling, the individual attempts to come to terms with the resulting alienation.

Essential then to our concept of black religion is the process of religious socialization that grows out of shared struggle and theodical reckoning. I want to put forth a notion of binding—community, camaraderie, and like-mindedness—as a corporate response to the absurd. Before moving to the counter perspective of the sacred canopy that grows from this collective struggle, a laying out of Berger's sociological process is necessary.

Applying this to the African American historical/socio context we can freely appeal to Berger's claim that "society is a dialectic phenomenon in that it is a human product, and nothing but a human product, that yet continuously acts back upon its producer." In this case readily available is the chaotic stimulus from which their sacred canopy grows—that of dire oppression and resulting suffering. The African American sacred canopy is constructed and grows out of chaos. The sacred canopy, in this case, does not exist but for suffering. It is the effect that streams from the cause. From this the externalization process manifests itself through the sharing of experiences and communal responses. These communal responses result in various forms of cultural production—music, art, folktales, sayings, rituals, rhetoric, dance, speaking styles, etc. These items become fertile soil for cultivating a vibrant religious culture and community that is distinct in its experience and manifestation.

64 Ibid., 3.
Through objectivation and internalization black religious adherents are formed by the culture they create out of shared suffering. The process thus culminates in legitimization, wherein themes such as “God can make a way out of no way” and “Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel, then why not every man?” take center stage to maintain the community in the face of doubt. The springboard to the pinnacle of our discussion comes by way of Berger’s last sub-category, nomization. If, on this level, human experience is ordered according to their constructed cosmos, what then becomes the rallying cry or signifying marker that encourages each member of the community to strive? What does this form of nomization look like? Approaching this by way of a totemic analysis shall thus be our next point of discussion.

The “Dark” Marker or Black Religious Totem

I have thus far attempted to shed light on the ways in which a certain “form” of religion could be and has been exhibited among a group who has traditionally suffered exponentially more than other racial and ethnic groups in the United States. The dark marker I am attempting to uncover is that defining feature (or features) that expresses, to some satisfaction, what a “black” Christian religiosity looks like. I use the term “dark” to connote the features of religiosity that lurk in the shadows of the void established by years of maltreatment in slavery. The marker of black religion is thus opaque and requires sufficient excavation to uncover.

If legally sanctioned equality and human freedom was an insufficient curative to counter the ravages of racial oppression, then, as we learned from Smith, another curative agent was needed to counter the toxicity and systemic violence against black people that
American law itself facilitated. Therefore, the curative agent of religion, here read socially, aided the black sufferer to establish what philosopher Lucius Outlaw describes as *cultural integrity*. Consider his following statement

"[T]he most significant features of the multifaceted struggle on the part of African peoples and people of African descent for a liberated existence has been and is the struggle to achieve cultural integrity: to embrace where available, to construct where unavailable, those productions and expressions of meaning which serve to reflect the self-affirmations of black people, our views of the world, in concepts and forms which we have projected for these purposes."  

At issue for Outlaw is the very meaning (or meaningfulness) of black existence in the United States. Connected to this consideration is the general nature of being and how that nature gets defined. The notions expressed here become an important engagement in the practice of the self and its ultimate preservation. Outlaw continues,

"Thus the struggle for cultural integrity (i.e., for a level of cultural development and an understanding of that development which affirms and reflects our history, our present, and our future possibilities as a people and as people among other peoples), given the history of enslavement, subjugation, subordination, discrimination, oppressions, in short, which have been (and are) directed against us, involves... a counter-movement away from subordination to independence."  

Again, Outlaw reflects the process of securing freedom and framing one’s own meaning. Therefore, Outlaw considers it important for African Americans to become involved in a cultural struggle. He terms this process a *symbolic reversal*, or a reversal of symbolism. In this process, one moves on the level of symbolic meaning from imposed determination of one’s (a people’s) existence to those generated by oneself (by the people themselves).  

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66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
marker—or, the totem of black religion. As we further unpack this totemic idea the work of Emile Durkheim requires our attention as the basis for the argument.

*Durkheim’s Totem*

Two years before Europe was shaken by World War I, sociologist Emile Durkheim published his seminal text, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Influenced by the changing social landscape of Europe, which had emphasized family, community, and religious faith, Durkheim sought to capture the social elements of religious life. Within this task he faced the growing ideology of the day, which stressed reason over religions faith. Ultimately he sought to show that religion at its most basic form was social and that this basic form is resident in all religions. Yet, for Durkheim, it was through the most primitive cultures that we are able to most clearly see these forms of religion. For our purposes, his unpacking of the totem within elemental religion is most compelling and serviceable.

Durkheim considers totemism as most primitive. Here he draws on the elements of religious phenomena (i.e., rites, belief, deities), which he says are not necessary in order to have religion. However, belief and rites (or the simple act of believing in something or general religious practices, not the substance behind them) point to the “ultimate concern” or “initial germ of religious life.”68 This allows us to engage what is common among primitive religions. Moving toward his official definition, religion is thus defined by its characteristics as experienced and practiced by its adherents.

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He then progresses by way of unpacking the *totem*. The totem can take the form of physical animal manifestation with restrictions regarding contact, interaction, touch, killing, or alteration. This differs from the sacrifice, as the totem itself is the symbol of the "divine," rather than an appeasement of the divine through atonement practices. Among the tribe the totem takes the form of a system of thought governing the body. The individual totem derives from the aggregate totem of the clan (representing the essence of the clan totem).

According to Durkheim, all religion is subject to the totemic framework.\(^69\) Generally speaking, the totem comes in the form of variety rather than individual (i.e., totem not as a particular cow, but the cow in general). Within a *phratry*, which is a group of several clans united as a single unit, one overriding totem prevails. A subordinate relationship exists between the totem of phratry and the totem of the clan.\(^70\) The totem functions not merely by name but also as emblem, a "coat-of-arms." It can function as a name of significance or as an emblem marking the existence of the clan. Not only this, the totem impressively illustrates the concepts of the sacred and the profane.\(^71\) Within its very nature the totem points the community toward the sacred. That is because the totem itself is considered sacred. But not only this, it stands as the very model, the perfect example of a sacred thing.\(^72\) It exists in this sense as a hidden force—galvanizing the

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\(^69\) Ibid., 121.

\(^70\) Ibid., 134.

\(^71\) Daniel L. Pals, "Society as Sacred: Emile Durkheim" in *Eight Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 98. The "sacred" and "profane" should be understood socially (as opposed to supernaturally) as separate realms where sacred things are set apart as superior, powerful, ad forbidden to normal contact, and deserving the greatest respect. Good or bad is not at issue in this dichotomy because it is up to the clan or community to decide what "good" or "bad" is. Therefore, the sacred could be some be considered bad (though good for the clan) and the profane good (while the clan may despise it). The only thing the sacred can never be is profane, not can the profane ever be sacred. The sacred thus arises out of the principle concerns of the community; the profane out of private or personal realms. (see Pals pg. 96)

\(^72\) Ibid.
community from within—and a visible image—reinforcing the community goals and desires.

The totem, then, according to Durkheim, symbolizes God and the community, because they are both the same thing.\textsuperscript{73} “God” in this sense grows from the concept of the totem and in turn flows down through the clan or community. Thus, the symbolism it conjures encourages the clan toward a certain end wherein the wants and needs of the community are met. From this the conclusion is emphatically drawn, religion, at least in the Durkheimian sense, is not intellectual or reliant on supernatural, but social. It serves as the carrier of social sentiments, providing symbols and rituals that enable people to express the deep emotions, which anchor them to their community.\textsuperscript{74}

\textit{Focusing in on the African American Context}

The process of creating distinct culture is not beholden to one community. As Durkheim endeavors to show us, a totemic analysis of religion can be utilized across various religious lines. What becomes an even more daunting challenge is to carve out distinct totems within one religion. Placing this argument in concert with the concerns of this analysis I will begin by approaching Christianity with an endeavor of carving out totems. My ultimate goal is to reveal the ways in which these various and distinct totems of religion reveal the essence of a given religious community. Current strands of evangelical Christianity, especially those of the conservative stripe, call for a focus on evangelism (sharing the Gospel with the paramount purpose of saving the lost to Christ). Consequently, themes that have less to do with sin or eschatology are minimized,

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 107.
sometimes even quieted altogether. Take for example the poignant sermon offered by Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. When she preaches, "Here in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard,"

75 her central aim is the establishment of a newly realized, fully human, black identity. Social concern for the wellbeing of the “least of these” is not relegated to saving them so that they might gain future glory through Christ. Attempts to place strategic focus on the experiential, social, and cultural aspects of life, which may produce far different concerns and biblical emphasis, are placed at the forefront of religious concern.

We are poised now to simply ask, what is the totem of black religion that is rooted in biblical engagement and formulation in the United States of America? At the outset I claim that this task is a bit messy, lacking the “neatness” indicative of the evangelical Christian model. I elucidate black biblical examination not to posit Christianity as normative among antebellum African American religious communities, but rather to illustrate a style of religious praxis. In fact, I make no claim that antebellum black scriptural extraction matches evangelical forms of Christianity of the day. Yet, the task is made possible by way of capturing the empowering sensibilities that African Americans have gained from the Bible. The features presented here are not at all distinct biblical categories, rather they represent a certain appropriation of the text. However, it must also be understood, as biblical scholar Cane Hope Felder submits it, “that traditional categories of hermeneutics—i.e., allegorical, Christological, typological, and sensus

75 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 103.
plenior hermeneutics—do not fully explain the interpretive principle or the hermeneutics of the early African American."^{76}

Reflecting on the totemic question calls to mind the ways in which black sufferers who have engaged and appropriated the biblical text have made use of its themes of liberation and victory over suffering and moral evil. Accordingly, an emphasis on the role of Jesus as the liberator transcends the allegorical and typological approaches to the interpretation of Scripture.^{77} Before we arrive at the actual totem or dark marker of black religion, I raise four categories of the African American traditional concept of Jesus during their early biblical engagement as enslaved, which I argue forms the backdrop of a black religious totemic ideology.

*Jesus — Altruistically Loving to the Poor and Subjugated.* This was the initial and primary way in which the slaves saw in Jesus something that contradicted the slanted forms of Christianity they had received. In the Beatitudes of Matthew, the poor are blessed as those who inherit the Kingdom of God (Matt. 5:3). This fact allowed the enslaved to begin to see themselves in a different light even if there was no sudden change in their circumstance.

*Jesus — Fighter against Social and Political Wrongs.* For the enslaved, this form of Jesus in the gospels put his altruism and love into action. Here Jesus champions their cause for social justice and fairness. In warning the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees of their ultimate destruction upon continuing in their present path (Matt. 23:13-39), Jesus

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pronounced seven denunciations, each beginning with "Woe to you." Those woes, in contrast to the Beatitudes, denounce false religion as utterly abhorrent to God and worthy of severe condemnation. As a result, the enslaved saw Jesus in a similar light speaking prophetically to their enslavers.

*Jesus – The Ultimate Suffering Servant.* The "suffering servant" motif was the initial guise through which African American scriptural investigators, from slavery through the civil rights movement, viewed themselves. As Jesus suffered and ultimately conquered so would they. Such identification made Jesus worthy, not only as a source of faith, but also for complete modeling. The mimetic basis for such performances, as maintained by Smith, is twofold, consisting in (1) an imitation of Christ—*imitatio Christi*—in which Jesus as "Suffering Servant" (Isaiah 53) provides a preeminent model for the nonviolent transformation of "victimage," and (2) 'homeopathic' applications of the imitatio Christi designed to 'cure' violence in the form of racism at the level of social change. Utilizing the descriptive language of Isaiah 53, the slaves were linked to Jesus in accordance with His "chastening" and "scourging" (53:5), and his "oppression" (53:8). Consequently, Jesus' purpose encompasses a paradigm of servanthood for the outcast, a model that all humanity is to emulate.

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Jesus – The Risen Conqueror. In marked juxtaposition to the suffering servant model of
Jesus, the biblical concept of Jesus as the risen and therefore conquering Savior thrusts
the black biblical observer toward confidence that their suffering could be overcome
through struggle with the divine. The following Negro spiritual confirms this assertion:

Jesus said He wouldn’t die no mo’,
Said He wouldn’t die no mo’,
So my dear chillens don’ yer fear,
Said He wouldn’t die no mo’.

De Lord tole Moses what ter do,
Said He wouldn’t die no mo’,
Lead de chillen od Is’el froo’,
Said He wouldn’t die no mo’. 81

This spiritual discloses the way in which the enslaved African American viewed Jesus as
a conqueror and therefore worthy of modeling. The constant refrain of Jesus never dying
anymore underlines the momentous significance of Jesus’ death and resurrection for
humankind, particularly the prototype oppressed Israel. 82 Jesus is reflected as defeating
the kingdom of Satan and all the political forces of evil representative of the demonic in
all realms. 83 The model of the conquering Jesus is applied to the hope of finally
overcoming the prevailing social evil of the day. As destructive as slavery was, Jesus,
who had overcome equally terrible odds, was the source of power to destroy the yoke of
slavery.

These codified three features partly serve as our litmus test as we assess the utility
of our theory of the dark marker of black religion in accordance with biblical
appropriation in the face of struggle and suffering. First, it functions not merely in name

81 Dwight N. Hopkins, ed., Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave
82 Ibid., 20.
83 Ibid.
but also as emblem, a rallying point, marking the existence of this black clan of sufferers. Secondly, the totem itself is the symbol of the “divine,” rather than an appeasement of the divine through atonement practices. Accordingly, thirdly, the totem simultaneously symbolizes both the divine and the community as an inner force and a visible image.

With the empowering features of the archetypal figure Jesus forming the core of black biblical interpretation and our focus on a religious desire to seek full and broadly defined humanity, the totem takes on a distinct character for African Americans vis-à-vis social disregard and maltreatment. At first glance one might look simply to the Christian cross of Christ as the key symbol conjuring sentiments of liberation and fullness—the empty cross has long stood as an emblematic symbol of divine victory. Yet, the emphasis of the empty cross is most often connected to victory over sin, not forces of hegemony. While these factors call to mind the totemic nature of the cross itself in Christian consciousness, it reveals a more general symbolic lynchpin for all Christians without formal distinction. In seeking out the dark marker black religion, however, my endeavor is to unearth that which lurks in the shadows, perhaps hidden from the general “Christian” observer but is luminous to members of a given community who’s shared identity in struggle is informed by the Bible, even if they themselves do not ascribe normative evangelical Christian orthodoxy.

The marker of black religion, then, rather than being an obvious symbol or even something held to as a symbolic trinket, is a bit more elusive. I posit that the dark marker or totem of black religion reveals itself through biblical engagement as connected to identity formation. Accordingly, this marker is the metamorphosis of the black body into the archetype of a liberated human affixed to a divine victor. With homeopathic
qualities black religion’s totemic marker works to heal the wounded community by making use of the same oppressive toxicity meant to harm. This totemic symbol functions as a two-in-one formulation. It is first conceptualized as materially human, even if, as a practical matter, freely exercised liberation (as an outward and visible reality) is not gained. Secondly, for the biblical observer, the metaphorical divine victor formulation comes in the form of Jesus. The triumphal Jesus sets the tone for the rallying attributes of the totem. For this reason the enslaved African American could be encouraged by way of hope and faith while yet enslaved. I am not arguing for a literally black Jesus in the way pastor and theologian Albert Cleage does in his book, *The Black Messiah*. Rather, this totem of black religion functions as ontological idea, unseen physically and yet grasped in collective consciousness.

The materialization of this totem, while not fixed to an inanimate object or associated with an animal who takes on mythical qualities, is revealed within a multitude of symbolic figures and actions within the black religious community. Black religion’s identifying marker displays free expression of religious outlet, desire, and action. The religion wondrously espoused by Baby Suggs Holy in *Beloved* exhibits the desired expression I am advancing. In calling for socially despised recent slaves to “love your flesh,” her emphasis is not on personal piety or one’s sin nature. She was not laboring to

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84 Albert Cleage’s *The Black Messiah* brings together several pointed sermons by the pastor and founder of the Shrine of the Black Madonna. Elucidating several fallacies of white Christianity, Cleage’s central concern is the reestablish, encourage, unify, and bolster what he terms as “The Black Nation.” This concept of the Black Nation reverberates thematically throughout the text as his central concern. Moreover, he endeavors to convey that the Messiah who stands as the central figure for black Christians is, indeed, black. Utilizing counter-hegemonic discourse these sermons address several concepts of white Christianity Cleage considers detrimental to the Black Nation. He uses these sermons as constructive and liberative tools to insure that African Americans are equipped to, as he puts it, unashamedly “challenge this lie” (3). To that end he calls on the “Church” to reinterpret to Christian message in terms of the needs of a Black Revolution. See Albert Cleage, Jr., *The Black Messiah* (African World Press, 1989).
establish that, in spite of their plight, they were "blessed and highly favored." Rather, she literally preaches that these poorly treated and weary souls incased in commodified black bodies must love their material flesh freely. An amended black body that simultaneously expresses the need for healing in light of maltreatment and offers hope for healing and the possibility of a new identity is the prime example of black religion's marker.

As we funnel this idea through the major features we've set out from Durkheim's totemic analysis, we are able to identify its various features manifested within antebellum black religious communities. With respect to the emblematic nature of this totem as a "coat-of-arms" marking a given black religious community's existence, this totem is expressed through liberated religious movement and cultural expression in spite of dire circumstances. Helpful on this level is W.E.B. DuBois' assessment of the black church in the south. Characterizing the black church as the "social center of Negro life in the United States," DuBois identifies its three central elements—the preacher, the music, and the frenzy. We concern ourselves at the moment with the frenzy—the state in which the worshiper is "possessed" by the spirit of the Lord.

According to DuBois the frenzy is expressed "when the Spirit of the Lord is passed by, and, seizing the devotee, made him mad with supernatural joy." A general observer to the worship in traditional black churches, even today, will find the "catching of the spirit," wailing and moaning, waiving of arms, outbursts of ecstatic joy or laughter, the kicking off of shoes, or the "holy dance" as identifying markers of this free religious expression. Unique to various forms of the black worship experience, these are not mere fanciful antics, as some unfamiliar observers have recorded. Rather, they serve as

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85 DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk, 121.
86 Ibid., 120.
outward signs, an emblematic expression, of what the Lord has done and can do for all. The sermonic offerings of Baby Suggs Holy are again useful. Morrison writes that at the beginning of each sermon, Baby Suggs would first summon the children to the center of the Clearing and have them openly and ecstatically laugh while their parents looked on. Next she would call forth the men from amongst the trees and ask them to dance. Through counter-clockwise movement reminiscent of the “ring shout,”87 their children and wives could see them freely express themselves through independently chosen bodily movement. She would then ask the women from among the worshipers to weep, “for the living, for the dead.” Again, the central thrust behind her caring admonishment was to establish bodily freedom, expression, and religious exchange prohibited within the context of slavery. This sort of frenzy is a potent initial step identifying the religious existence of the community of suffering believers who have faith in spite of deplorable odds.

As an image the dark marker may exhibit freedom of expression from within the void through what I call the craft of garb. As an element of expressive and decorative culture, Anthony Pinn theorizes this form of expression in terms of “declaration.” Functioning as an elemental articulation of the dark marker, the craft of garb couches black religion’s totem in visual terms. Even today, when many Christian churches stress ideas of casual worship and thus casual dress for Sunday services, traditional black church pews are filled with parishioners elegantly dressed in their “Sunday best.” In

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87 The ring shout is probably the oldest surviving African American performance tradition on the North American continent. It is a fusion of counterclockwise dance-like movement, call-and-response singing, and percussion of hand clapping and a rhythmic stick beating that is African in its origins. The ring shout affirms oneness with the Spirit and ancestors as well as community cohesiveness. During slavery elements of Christianity were grafted into the ring shout.
many of these churches it isn’t a question of whether or not to “dress up” for church on
Sunday. Children are exhorted not to run or play in their “church shoes” so as not to
render them untidy for Sunday services. Women attempt to match outfits with just the
right pair of shoes and men search for the right tie. During slavery, black bodies were
called upon to labor in various forms “from sunup to sundown.” The clothing expected
for strenuous work was often rough, tattered and merely functional for the task at hand.

In marked opposition, crafting the right garb on Sunday was itself a significant
task within religious praxis for the slave. As a form of black declarative religious
practice, through church attire blacks declared “that there was more to life than work, and
that a sense of dignity and self-worth could survive the depredations of an avowedly
racist society. Work clothes—non-descript and uniform—tended to erase the black body;
Sunday clothing enhanced and proclaimed it.”88 This sense of bodily adornment was not
simply a mode of preference, rather, as Pinn asserts, it “speaks to a deeper sense of
religiosity.”89 Framed in terms of the craft of garb, this form of visual expression is an
important element for understanding and capturing the dark marker of black religion as it
reveals the self-amending/restorative nature of black religiosity.

The clearest Durkheimian feature reflected in the marker of black religion as the
simultaneous symbol of the divine and the clan is exhibited in the liberated human’s
transformative connection to a divine victor. This feature is seen in figures such as
Denmark Vesey, David Walker, Maria Stewart, and Henry McNeal Turner. Functioning
as an inner force it encourages the religious community toward hope and faith, as a
visible image to the community these and other luminaries express freedom of movement

88 Shayne White and Graham White, Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture from Its
89 Pinn, Terror and Triumph, 147.
and cultural expression in various forms. These liberated humans affixed to a divine victor were themselves expressions of the divine by way of their empowering activity within and on behalf of the community. On the level of the unsung hero, this figure may reveal itself in preacher or exhorter, who often functioned in the antebellum African American context as a leader, a politician, an orator, a "boss," an intriguer, an idealist.\textsuperscript{90} This liberated human figure stands historically at the center of black religious life empowering others according to his or her supernatural power in connection to the divine. Thus, on the level of the visible and physically tangible, yet another return to Morrison’s fictional character of Baby Suggs Holy requires our attention.

Previously we discussed the ways in which Baby Suggs Holy’s words and works ushered in the idea of a black religious totem. I now illustratively offer her as a prime exemplar of the \textit{liberated human affixed to divine victor}, or dark marker of black religion. While in full acknowledgement that this is a fictional character, I argue for her representative legitimacy as an example of how this dark marker \textit{would} look in embodied form. Critical theorist Dennis Patrick Slattery gives useful attention to the healing and religious qualities of Baby Suggs in his eloquently written book, \textit{The Wounded Body}. In his analysis of her role in healing the wounds of those broken by slavery, he highlights the significance of her building up of the communal body in distinction to Beloved’s tendency to produce shame. Of Baby Suggs Holy he suggests,

"As a ‘figure of the mother-goddess,’ Baby Suggs is an originary presence, a archetypal counterweight to the primordial and destructive impulses of Beloved. Only as such a presence—mythical and primordial as Beloved herself, yet as Christian in her wedding Scripture to incarnation as is Christ—does Baby Suggs offer the community both the

\textsuperscript{90} DuBois, \textit{The Souls of Black Folk}, 120.
words and memory necessary to expunge Beloved from the communal body."\textsuperscript{91}

In this sense, Baby Suggs removes the potential fragmenting that results from Beloved's presence. Interestingly, Baby Suggs aims her restorative work at the suffering community, not directly at Beloved herself. As a result, her words transform the community.

Baby Suggs actual words carry the weight of her transformative power to heal the community. As Slattery maintains, "she is the mid-wife of not any words but of the Word, the sacred utterance of Scripture, whose stories redeem the narratives of all those living who struggle to remember and accept their narratives."\textsuperscript{92} That being the case, she fleshly represents and models the \textit{divine victor} element by exhibiting a liberated sense of her world while trying to establish others to the same level. Her significance is therefore marked by a navigation between divinity and humanity. As a servant of her people, Baby Suggs hems the torn seams of the community through the "Logos of healing in which soothing words are used along with the webbing for her wounds."\textsuperscript{93}

Relating Baby Suggs Holy in these terms, the liberated human affixed to a divine figure as myth and symbol becomes a powerful counter-hegemonic force for the enslaved. Aligning with the divine victor of religious lore affords the enslaved a new mindset, posture, and religious language potent for countering a Homo Sacerian social placement. But how do we epistemologically conceptualize this totem? Is it solely useful as projection or is there something more there?

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 225.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 215.
In a sense, this black religious totem in part functions as projection in the Feuerbachian sense. With general regard to human identity in relation to the construction of religion, Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* advances a human centered theory of religion. By way of illustration, he assesses the merits of Christianity and its impact on given communities. His ultimate position is that what one subscribes to within a given religion, over and above its utility, is nothing more than the human being projecting his or her own purified nature, freed from the limits of individual man, made objectively contemplated.\(^{94}\) This to say, the divine being simply reflects the human minus the warts associated with the finite. Accounting for this human engagement with religion makes paramount an assessment of humanity’s religious action in concert with constructed theory (praxis). This human motivation is marked by an impulse to struggle for a *new and improved* identity. For Feuerbach, this process takes form through human collective consciousness.

Feuerbach’s analysis becomes quite illuminating, even compelling, as we assess the potential for a totem of black religion. However, for our purposes, it is important to

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\(^{94}\) What seems clear in Feuerbach’s argument is that human motivation becomes the norm that drives a resulting religious formulation within a given community. While he does not consider humans prefect or even perfectible in the individual sense, through collective consciousness humans come to a realization of the infinite. This “power of thought” places humans in the unique position of not only conceptualizing the infinite but also esteeming themselves collectively to a level *with* the infinite.

But consciousness is a tricky enterprise for Feuerbach. According to him, “consciousness is self-verification, self-affirmation...joy in one’s own perfection.”(6) In this initial sense, humans are in essence infinite through consciousness because consciousness itself is infinite. Yet, this consciousness also becomes the very thing that reveals humanity’s limitations to itself. It may be prudent to question the effect of this split-consciousness. Certainly, Feuerbach immollizes his argument short of completely dealing with the inherent need for ontological reconciliation. However, the form of split-consciousness lurking within his argument regarding the utility of religion is the very stuff of the perspective of a liberated human affixed to a divine victor at play here.

Feuerbach speaks in terms of progression with respect to the projected divine being grafted back onto the finite. But a progression to what end? What is more, a significant assumption is at play here. If God is in fact *me/us* in the sense of the perfectible me while I reflect on my imperfections (finitude), the assumption is that finitude ultimately wants to become *itself* (perfected). Such a work involves objectifying human attributes and then projecting them on a divine holder of these attributes who holds them perfectly. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1989), 14.
note that his model is only useful up to a point. Feuerbach holds that religion, Christianity in particular, is the objectification and/or projection of the human, free of its flaws projected back onto itself. Therefore, his point of departure is that this manipulated projection is in fact solely human, with no divine attributes whatsoever. In the case of the plantation populations assessed here, the divine victor, to whatever extent manipulated and fashioned, indeed exists in the ultimate sense. In a word, this Jesus is real. Still, for our purposes, the style or process of manipulating a projection (whatever the projection) in Feuerbach’s model is helpful.

I acknowledge right off that a liberated human affixed to a divine victorious figure is perhaps a partly fanciful and partly illusive hypothesis. However, I hold that such a concept has merit for an understanding of the socialization of black religion in the United States. This totemic configuration can be exhibited in all people within the clan or identified as a single symbol encouraging hope that all clan members achieve full humanity. The community, when assessing or relating to this totemic figure, is not concerned with proofs or end results revealing that the divine is in some way on their side over and against other communities. Rather, it is driven by a norm of hope through a perpetual push toward something better. Socially this concept becomes transformative for the African American approaching the Bible in a posture of hope who attempts to make meaning in a world wherein he or she is subjugated. Thus, this totem springs forth from the context of chattel slavery in the United States but is not limited to any particular time-period.

This dark marker of black religion at once symbolizes the self-amended qualities of a community ever engaged in the struggle to alleviate the disparity between the
“haves” and “have-nots.” The result is likened to Smith’s analysis of the “transformed victim” within black religious community who makes use of the encountered victimization and counters violence by conjuring the divine victor’s model of triumph. From this, reconciliation of the black religious community ensues through the symbol of this marker of black religion. Such reconciliation, according to Smith, is “a phenomenon of ‘mimetic intimacy,’ in which an enemy functions intimately as an accomplice in the process of [securing] one’s own transformation.” The marker of black religion stands as an emblem in that it exhibits for the observer the essence and existence of the community, whether through the frenzy of worship style or other modes of cultural expression. It symbolizes the divine as an archetype of a victorious Jesus, ushering in unlimited human possibility and thus a changed posture of the sufferer in relation to oppression. And finally, it simultaneously symbolizes both the divine and the clan through human hope and divine empowerment to actively fight for a better future and see themselves as “five-fifths human.”

Conclusion

Chapter four encompassed two interconnected tasks: to identify an underpinning that leads to a distinctive “black” religiosity and, secondly, to identify the thing that marks black religion. This chapter progressed in two interrelated movements. As prompted the call to “be amended, five-fifths human,” we first set out to uncover a core desire to amend the wounded self. This wounding, as perpetrated upon blacks by those with sovereign authority over them, encourages an innate desire to be healed, or made

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95 Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 188.
whole. We were tutored by Michel Foucault and Theophus Smith in the crafting of a useable framework for understanding this inner thrust to "amend" the self to a fully human status.

Our subsequent movement took on the task of establishing the dark marker of black religion. Obscure on the surface we sought to unearth the look, feel, and representative texture of black Christianity. Rather than an inanimate object such as the cross or a representative animal, this marker was part physical and part idea. Part viewable symbol and part symbolic experience. It reflects the manifestation to black religion's theme of healing and wholeness, which we will more fully take on in the next and final chapter. For our current purposes, the dark marker represented as the metamorphosis of the black body into the archetype of a *liberated human affixed to a divine victor*. Such an archetype reveals mimetic tendencies toward a divine victor in an effort to secure (for itself and others) and exhibit full human liberation. The manifestation to this liberation was shown in various forms, from free bodily expression and the *craft of garb* to the efforts of early civil rights fighters and abolitionists.

Ultimately, the dark marker of black religion projects the freedom to labor towards wholeness of body, mind, and spirit while simultaneously creating space for social advancement. Toni Morrison's character Baby Suggs Holy offered the clearest example of a physical and mythical archetype of this figure. However, capturing the marker of black religion by no means encompasses our ultimate task. We now move to chapter five where I introduce the *hermeneutic of reclamation* as a viable approach to studying black Christianity.
Chapter Five

Toward a Hermeneutic of Reclamation

The central structural question is cast in terms of what the Bible has done and continues to do for black people that contributes to their health and well-being, and their reasonable and just participation in the multitude of situations in life that are conditioned by identity as African-Americans.¹

—James Shopshire

They found woven in the texts of the Bible a crimson thread of divine justice antithetical to the injustice they had come to know all too well.²

—Allen Callahan

“If he learns to read the Bible it will forever unfit him to be a slave.”³

—Frederick Douglass, quoting his master, Master Hugh

This chapter draws from the issue initially advanced in chapter one—how maltreatment plays a role in an investigation and development of religious experience. In

³ Frederick Douglass, Life and Times of Frederick Douglass (New York: Pathway Press, 1941), 88-89.
the first chapter I began to approach the challenge associated with locating antebellum black religious experience, promoting this matter in part as a problem of history, with an eye toward ways to better capture and thus possibly understand religious history. In so doing, we framed a response to the challenge posed by history via a phenomenological approach as a way to methodologically address this historical issue and attempt to remove blind spots of black religious experience—that is, a removal of those things hidden from us about black religious experience as a result of institutional silencing and oppression.

Chapter five resets that hermeneutical discussion, confining it to a particular interpretive response to the problem of black religious experience and history. What I am offering is a method of discerning this particular religious experience more clearly. Accordingly, I am providing a hermeneutical tool for assessing the experiences and events affecting the antebellum black religious community, experiences which ultimately lead to a distinct "way" of living or carrying out their religious lives. This chapter will consider the distinct modes of religious expression that were born out of African American investigation of the Judeo-Christian sacred text. The Bible becomes for some a symbol and for others a concrete expression of religious thought as they seek full recognition of their humanity. Biblical reflections abound in terms of what this sacred text could offer people suffering under the brunt of racial oppression. The hermeneutical device I am advancing unearths the way in which this process played itself out for many enslaved blacks during the antebellum period. I therefore point to the nature of black strivings to be considered fully human and the desire for a cure of injustice as fertile
ground for a discussion and introduction of what I have coined the hermeneutic of reclam.

In offering an interpretive device, I am picking up where chapter four left off in its establishment of a self-amending undercurrent—that internal desire to make and presents oneself as whole or fully human—embedded within black religion by offering a framework for interpreting black religious experience. Quite simply, before unpacking the function of black religion in more detail through application, which takes place in chapter six, I want to indicate and name the governing hermeneutic—one guided by a principle of reclaiming something of religious substance or import from religious dictum used against blacks.

The governing thesis of this chapter holds that the hermeneutic of reclam reveals a liberative engagement with society and culture through which the oppressed were able to find utility in biblically and socially constructed ideas and tools meant for their demise. These actions of liberation are performed and make possible Christian formation among suffering black communities. Such an extraction of biblical-cultural and social particles were serviceable and facilitated the creation of better spaces of human fullness and made possible a critique of racist formulations of religion and culture. Ultimately, the hermeneutic of reclam points the interpreter to vibrant counter-cultural activity laboring to change corporally constricted social reality.

Existing hermeneutical tools have sought to make sense of black religious experience. Offering the hermeneutic of reclam necessitates the justification of its existence over against this existing corpus. Accordingly, in this chapter our first order of business will be to compare and contrast this hermeneutical formulation to the
hermeneutic of suspicion and accounting for the way other have used it. Where and if possible, I will carve out a space of this new device for capturing the nature of black religious experience. Upon engaging suspicion, I will also query Anthony Pinn's principle hermeneutical devices, paying attention to what I am offering as distinctive and, thus, necessary as an alternate hermeneutical tool. His hermeneutical tools, in the form of nitty-gritty hermeneutics and a hermeneutic of style, are important in that they too address distinct concerns with the use of suspicion. Accordingly, an assessment of these devices is necessary in that they, as does reclamation, address suspicion's shortcomings. My task will be to show reclamation's unique way of capturing black religious experience and offer what I consider a more useful way of doing so. I hope to give a basis for reclamation's inclusion in the corpus of black religious study. Thereafter, we shall proceed toward unfolding our thesis by giving some attention to the nature of black socio-political experience and resulting religious experience. Accordingly, I will mark the importance of religious experience in the construction of the hermeneutic of reclamation. Lastly, I will introduce the hermeneutic of reclamation by defining and unpacking its principle features.

**A Place for Reclamation as a Hermeneutical Tool**

Efforts by scholars of religion and theologians to account for the nature of black religious experience have made use of existing hermeneutical devices. Accordingly, I assess the merits of a reclamation hermeneutic over and against other modes of interpretation, such as the *hermeneutic of suspicion* through which black liberation theologians, African American interpreters of the Bible, scholars of black religion, as
well as enslaved and free blacks during the antebellum period have historically issued a critique of the oppressive elements of Christianity and racially charged biblical interpretation. Later hermeneutical tools, in the form of the *hermeneutic of style* and *nitty-gritty hermeneutics* advanced by Anthony Pinn are also open to exploration. Both advance arguments beyond suspicion. Beginning with the hermeneutic of suspicion, I give initial attention to its Ricoerian formulations before moving to an investigation of its use with respect to black religion. In doing so I want to give attention to the antecedent formulations concerns that spawned this investigative idea.

*The Hermeneutic of Suspicion: A Formulary Discussion*

A useful, if polemical, entry point to assess the general viability of this tool is offered by Paul Ricoeur, who holds that the use of interpretation as a tactic of suspicion and as a battle against masks calls for a philosophical construct that subordinates the entire problem of truth and error to the expression of the will to power.\(^4\) The emphasis on the will to power seems at first problematic in that it shifts emphasis of the investigation off of extracting meaning and ultimately, the truth of the subject. If, then, the goal of interpretation is the demystifying of sign and symbol, initiating an investigation wherein suspicion is the primary root framing the activity seems to obscure the goal of the interpreter. In this regard Ricoeur continues that "[o]ver and against interpretation as restoration of meaning we shall oppose interpretation according to...the school of suspicion."\(^5\) The suspicion spoken of here suggests, as Ricoeur puts it, "suspicion


\(^5\) Ibid., 32.
concerning the illusions of consciousness." Yet, these illusions of consciousness have taken up the lion’s share of many who engage the Bible from the purview of the oppressed.

A secondary benefit may be gained from a firsthand hermeneutical approach of suspicion, however. That is to say, a hermeneutics driven by suspicion may reveal the authenticity residing within the ambiguities of the existential. A hermeneutic of suspicion seems then to anticipate corollary or perhaps conjunctive hermeneutical ideas, a point I will make clearer below. In short, it seems to acknowledge the problem that resides in Ricoeur’s critique—the presumed lack of uncovering truth from sign and symbol as a firsthand task of interpretation. But the driving force may very well be a process of uncovering truth best accessible through a method of suspicion. In short, a debunking of obscure or even false projections of truth is at play. The posture of capturing a truer essence of the subject through suspicion gains traction when seen as a way of parceling out meaning from the opaque. Along this line, we may thus learn from Charles Long’s “second suspicion” in hermeneutics as employed by the oppressed. This time, according to Long, there exists “a suspicion surrounding the necessary relationship obtaining between primitives, primitivism, and civilization. By implication, this second suspicion is at the same time a suspicion regarding civilization and religion.” Suspicion of this magnitude becomes an initial posture toward a process of capturing a truer sense of the subject and its place within the world. As I see it, this idea is the basis for understanding the utility of a hermeneutic of suspicion.

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6 Ibid., 34.
7 Long, Significations, 85.
8 Long, Significations, 92-3.
The Hermeneutic of Suspicion: As Tool

Utility aside, however, what we are left with in the hermeneutic of suspicion is a solid tool offering a foundation for critique and analysis of history and culture that fails to unearth continual liberative practices. *Making the Wounded Whole* pushes beyond the foundational or first step idea of suspicion to a fuller excavation of religious experience. Critiques of the hermeneutics of suspicion by those grappling with the nature and meaning of black religious experience give credibility to the critique found here. Pinn argues that “[m]odes of interpretation, such as a hermeneutic of suspicion, used by many in black religious studies—including black theology, ethics, biblical studies, and history—are limited in that they point out the bad faith of the status quo but offer little more than this awareness of oppression.”⁹

In conjunction with the limitations highlighted above (I will later aim a more detailed evaluation at suspicion itself), a deeper critique surfaces with respect to black liberation theology’s method of deploying the hermeneutic of suspicion. We find in the black theological mode of suspicion a confining of black religious experience by forcing it to conform to tightly defined principles of Christian praxis. Black liberation theology’s efficacy in plausibly establishing its liberative claims about black religious experience through suspicion therefore becomes a meaningful discussion. By way of theological discourse, theologian James Cone has worked to come to grips with the historical realities posed in part one of *Making the Wounded Whole*.

Cone proposes a hermeneutical thrust driven by suspicion as a feature of the liberation norm of black theology. In this sense it governs the trajectory and, it could be

said, the mood of black theology's liberation focus. Black theology's hermeneutical
thrust might well be considered bold in conception. Take Cone's words, for example, in
describing black theology's hermeneutical undercurrent:

The norm [hermeneutic] of black theology must take seriously two
realities, actually two aspects of a single reality: the liberation of blacks
and the revelation of Jesus Christ.... The norm of all God-talk which seeks
to be black-talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the black Christ who
provides the necessary soul for black liberation. This is the hermeneutical
principle for black theology, which guides its interpretation of the
meaning of Christianity.... The norm of black theology, which identifies
revelation as a manifestation of the black Christ, says that he is those very
blacks whom white society shoots and kills.¹⁰

The establishment of a black Christ, even on an ontological basis, configures black
teology's hermeneutical emphasis in terms of black liberation. Pointing back to Christ
and this special kinship with oppressed blacks in this manner formulates the work of the
Divine as an imperative to first and foremost secure freedom for black sufferers in the
United States. In this sense, God's liberating work through Christ (1) reveals both a
predetermined and resolute intent to bring about black freedom and simultaneously, (2)
as Cone himself holds, breaks the power of white racism.¹¹ For Cone, these features of
black theology's use of a hermeneutic based in suspicion encompass all that need be said
about black-talk in relation to the Divine.

It is the stance that this level of black-talk about the Divine is "all that need be
said" that makes a hermeneutic of reclamation necessary and the use of suspicion limited.
To explain, black theology's use of suspicion collapses into a single emphasis when
critiquing oppressive uses of the Bible—Christ's work to liberate oppressed blacks. To
the point, they seek to answer the questions regarding the suffering of African Americans

¹⁰ James H. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll:
¹¹ Ibid.
by promoting liberation as God’s paramount, if only, work on behalf of the oppressed. Along such a line of thought, Cone holds that the Jesus “of the biblical and black traditions is not a theological concept but a liberating presence in the lives of the poor in their fight for dignity and worth.” The affirmative nature of Cone’s words here draws him to the ultimate conclusion that God is indeed on the side of the oppressed. Thus, “[i]n the experience of the cross and resurrection, we know not only that black suffering is wrong but that it has been overcome in Jesus Christ. This faith in Jesus’ victory over suffering is a once-for-all event of liberation.”

Suspicion in this way creates a narrow space of critique within black theology wherein liberation from oppression occupies the central space for understanding black religious experience in relation to the Bible and culture. However, what also results is the challenge of proving the nature of God’s work or even desire for black liberation in the way it gets played out in black theology. Black theology is simply not equipped to reveal practices of freedom nor to prove the extent of God’s desire for blacks to have full equality. For Pinn this confining of religious expression softens the rough edges of black experience. As we will soon discuss, Pinn offers a nitty-gritty hermeneutic and a hermeneutic of style to address elements of suspicion’s shortcomings. His critiques of suspicion are utilitarian as we begin to frame the ways in which the hermeneutic of reclamation offers its own critiques.

Suffice it to say, the way black theology makes use of suspicion seems only equipped to point us to a confined image of God’s works for, with, and through

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13 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 177.
humanity. Humanity’s liberative religious actions are thus static or subsumed altogether in a posture of hope and expectation in connection to the cross of Christ. But could the biblical narrative, including the Christ event, have spawned more complex action and religious activity? Is there a way to expand our framework regarding the content of sought liberation for the oppressed? Can we recast a new thought on what liberation entails for the oppressed, how it functions as a norm within everyday religious practices? These questions and their representative ideas shall govern my remaining hermeneutical critiques and offer the basis for my move to a hermeneutic of reclamation.

Let me now do a bit more to particularly differentiate the hermeneutic of reclamation from the hermeneutic of suspicion. As the primary outcome of this comparison, the merits of the hermeneutic argued within Making the Wounded Whole should become clearer. From the perspective of this investigation, hermeneutics is regarded as the demystification of a meaning presented to the interpreter in the form of disguise.¹⁵ This process thus entails a removal of the disguise that create destructive religio-cultural ideas that affect the social and bio-political positioning of African Americans. The hermeneutic of suspicion is characterized by its critique and suspicion of certain areas of translation or of what is offered to the interpreter. Ricoeur, as we have seen, marks an initial interpretive move governed by suspicion as problematic. Conversely, along with sociologist John B. Thompson, I would hold that this type of hermeneutics is animated by skepticism towards the given, and it is characterized by a distrust of the symbol as a dissimulation of the real.¹⁶ Thence, it searches for instances of

¹⁶ Ibid.
unfair or slanted bias, which creates a culture of domination wherein one group
subjugates another. To be sure, it involves reading and/or interpreting against the grain.

Even with a standard practice of critical questioning born out of a hermeneutic of
suspicion, there seems to be a limit to its capacity to continually engage in rebellion,
moving it beyond mere naming or identification. To what end, one might ask, does one
utilize this hermeneutical construction? This question becomes important as one seeks to
gauge the full merit of a hermeneutic of suspicion in the African American context.
Perhaps a better question is: does this line of critical questioning go far enough? Again,
we have seen that the principle thrust of a hermeneutic of suspicion is to respond to uses
of the Bible that reinforce extreme subjugation. However, one might question its utility
with respect to its ability to do more to pinpoint a problem. With this in mind, my claim
here is simple. A hermeneutic of suspicion is, at best, useful as a first step process to
secure a liberative posture against the absurd. However, it seems to stop short of
identifying sustained practices of creating space in the world.

I am here arguing that the hermeneutic of suspicion offers a basis and backdrop
for a hermeneutic of reclamation. Suspcion, when linked to reclamation activity,\textsuperscript{17}
discloses the root mindset that reveals a need to rebel against oppression—read here as
hegemonic uses of the Bible. Viewed another way, used as a tool, a hermeneutic of
suspicion is a reactive response to oppression. Conversely, the hermeneutic of
reclamation can be characterized by its uncovering of a proactive push against tyranny, in
a different way than a hermeneutic of style (discussed below), among suffering African
Americans within a world where oppression exists. While reaction is important, it fails to

\textsuperscript{17}Which will function according to the descriptive term \textit{curative recalibration} activity described
in chapter 6.
exhibit consistent activity; it stands solely as a counter move. Reclamation discloses the taking of an offensive stance to create a space for the oppressed through ingenuity. Reclamation emphasizes social and cultural wrongs and brings to light the way co-sufferers continue to establish themselves as whole persons, filled with creative ideas about their own existence and expression. What further distinguishes reclamation from suspicion is that reclamation gains traction directly from the “waste” of life—the very ideas, social formulations, historical realities, and religious uses meant to wound black bodies and render them putrid. This point will be further discussion later.

From what we have heretofore discussed, Anthony Pinn’s devices of interpretation—that is, the nitty-gritty hermeneutic and the hermeneutic of style—are useful as an attempt to unpack the nature of a varied and complex religious expression, which reclamation also seeks. However, while he clearly moves black religious investigation in a useful new direction through his nitty-gritty hermeneutic, I would like to suggest that he has excluded certain religious practices and some religious voices of the oppressed from the conversation. With this in mind, I would like to take a critical turn to his work. Assessing them separately, I begin with nitty-gritty hermeneutics, before moving to his hermeneutics and style.

Getting Down to the Nitty-Gritty: Pinn’s Early Hermeneutic

Pinn aims a critique of suspicion beyond its lack of capturing the “rough edges” of black experience. Through a nitty-gritty hermeneutical emphasis, Pinn does well to also critique black liberation theology’s use of suspicion from the standpoint that unlike their use of suspicion, his tool “is not wed to the same doctrinal or theological
presuppositions, thereby freeing inquiry to critique these presuppositions. According to this line of argument black liberation theology not only forces black experience to conform to Christian principles and values, the principal deficiency Pinn wants to correct, but I argue it also compresses those Christian ideas of the Bible to singular arguments that necessitate the proof of God's good intentions.

Lassoing my own critique for a moment, the primary features of the nitty-gritty hermeneutical device need to be further explicated. Pinn argues that nitty-gritty advances (1) a sense of heuristic rebelliousness & raw uncompromised insight, (2) a sense of nonconformity, and (3) ideas fortified to ridicule interpretations and interpreters who seek to inhibit or restrict liberative movement and hard inquiries into the problems of life. The value of this string of critique goes without saying. Arguing that a more complex and thus more genuine form of black religious thought, notably its function in response to racial oppression, is best, if not only, captured outside of certain theistic expressions fails to capture the broader corpus of liberative action performed by the oppressed. In "forcing a confrontation with the 'funky stuff' of life" does nitty-gritty assume that this confrontation can best take place in a non-theistic mode of religious expression in response to the problem of evil? The answer to these questions seems to be, yes. Extending the hermeneutical conversation to include black cultural expression and productions such as the blues and hip-hop, while viable, are but independent parts of a greater whole of religio-cultural expression. Of course, this analysis does not presume that this fact is unknown to Pinn. In fact, he identifies the basis for a nitty-gritty hermeneutical device as one of projecting black religious diversity, especially given that

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"non-Christian resources are forced into the parameters of theistic expression."\textsuperscript{20} For Pinn, such a limitation regarding black religious experience is at once irresponsible and myopic. Thus, his expansion of the black religious conversation presses against theistic formulations of black religious expression, but at the same time, makes room for black religious traditions such as the Nation of Islam and Voodoo. However, the most prominent way nitty-gritty hermeneutics gets played out is through Pinn’s argument for a black humanism tradition.\textsuperscript{21}

In applying his nitty-gritty hermeneutic to black humanism Pinn still seems ready to privilege the type of religious expression one can gather from non-theistic traditions, or at least certain theistic formulations with respect to the resolution of the problem of evil. What results is an un-reconciled attempt at categorizing the merits of one non-theistic formulation over and against other formulations. Conversely, I seek to extend a hermeneutical query that pays more pointed attention to the ways complex liberative expression can be ascertained from within the theistic based expression of Christianity in more culturally vibrant ways, distinct, as we will see, from where he goes with style. I seek to advance a perspective that even a hermeneutical device utilized within a biblical context, wed generally to Christian doctrine, can differ from a suspicion hermeneutic that is wed to a confined set of doctrinal and theological presuppositions. While Pinn does

\textsuperscript{20} Pinn, \textit{Why, Lord?}, 136.

\textsuperscript{21} Identifying what he terms a “theological pothole” inherent in black theological arguments regarding the issue of suffering, Pinn’s \textit{Why, Lord?} endeavors to offer new ways of dealing with the presence of evil and suffering. For Pinn, black theology’s adherence to a divine and transcendent God leaves it subject to faulty arguments of redemptive suffering; that suffering is intrinsically bad, but there lies a secondary benefit ordained by God (10). Unlike William Jones, who calls into question God’s allegiance to blacks in his book \textit{Is God a White Racist?}, Pinn prefers a response that uncompromisingly moves toward liberation without adherence to a divine being. For him this alternative response must be better positioned to endow African Americans with healthy life options without resorting to the perils of redemptive suffering models. To that end, Pinn elevates Black humanism as a fuller mode of critical engagement in response to suffering, which rejects the Christian concept of God altogether.
not deny this in general, he does seem to deny the extent to which certain theistic strands of religious expression can themselves reveal the "funky stuff" of life. This idea becomes the principle challenge of reclamation and calls for a deeper juxtaposing probe of Pinn's hermeneutical devices.

Emphasizing the merits of and need for a non-theistic hermeneutical device, Pinn, in return, seems to limit this tool from seamlessly functioning across the fullest spectrum of black religious life—which includes theistic forms of expression he finds troubling. That is, while he secures a place for a hermeneutical device that brings broader sources of black life into the conversation, nitty-gritty hermeneutics fails to give enough attention to the possibilities of complexity that may too be found within black religious life where the Bible is appreciably formative, especially given its dominant place in black Christian culture. Where might we see the rough edges within Christianity as lived and expressed by oppressed blacks? In indicating the possibility of theistic formulations Pinn stops short of showing the way a nitty-gritty hermeneutic is equipped to expand the corpus of black religion within Christianity.

A move to non-theistic black religious cultural production is fundamental to a fuller conception of black religious experience but still ignores or renders silent the possibilities that are drawn from the Bible and yet equally complex and vibrant. A large pool of the black religious population remains insufficiently tapped on the basis of its dominance within black religious experience. How do we reconcile moving to a device that has the sole task of unearthing possibilities the have ferment outside of the dominant religious orientation? What makes this move away from Christian doctrinal and theological presuppositions better? Pinn would stridently answer that it is because a
nitty-gritty offers a fuller response to moral evil and suffering. Nitty-gritty doesn’t deny Christian orientation but rather seeks to place that orientation within a larger framework. Unfortunately, a nitty-gritty hermeneutic also subjects certain forms of theistic expression as faulty due to their inability of properly reconcile the issue of redemptive suffering, therefore limiting the scope of what can be expressed as liberative within certain strands of Christian discourse. By way of a hermeneutic of reclamation I attempt to explore ways black liberative expression can by observed in a rough form that does not fall prey to problematic nature of redemptive suffering. Thus, reclamation acknowledges the problematic nature of back suffering while highlighting the possibility of Christian expression that does not attempt the show the secondary benefit of black suffering. In this way, as we will assess in chapter six, reclamation reveals declarative language and expression drawn from the junk of racial ideas that fortify and mobilize black folks toward struggle for liberation.

Firm in its approach, nitty-gritty hermeneutics limits the discussion about black religious experience. Its position of “telling it like it is” falls short in that it too limits black religious experience to non-doctrinal forms and, even worse, re-frames the black religious discussion into a reverse privileging—non-theistic cultural expression as optimal. By stating that Pinn’s move amounts to a reverse privileging of non-doctrinal sources is partly to hold that his argument against suspicion becomes counter-productive. That is, by privileging a non-doctrinal/non-theistic hermeneutical device he places limits on the very essence of the hermeneutical practice. That is to say, Pinn constrains the extent to which interpretation of black religious experience is possible through what amounts to a relegation of certain forms of theistic expression. In so doing, nitty-gritty
comes short if his ultimate intent is to broaden our understanding of black religion. It thus begs the question: can a nitty-gritty form of hermeneutics seamlessly work within doctrinal or theistic context? Is it that this emphasis on the "raw" or "rough" forms of life simply cannot be captured within a hermeneutic wed to theistic presuppositions?

I am interested in pushing toward a hermeneutical device that finds ways to harmonize these issues, whether within or outside of a doctrinal presuppositions, and yet still pushes for a fuller capturing and reckoning of black religious experience. While the reclamation hermeneutic makes use of theistic sensibilities, it is not wed to compressed ideas of how these sensibilities get played out. Reclamation therefore embraces black religious expression that reveals or is influenced by theistic sensibilities that manifest in many cultural forms—among them are published pamphlets, fiction, and declarative expression, as well as contemporary strands of what I consider prophetic hip-hop. The issue of liberation, whether cast as a norm fueling black religion or as the primary goal of black religion, remains in need of fresh attention with an emphasis of its broader expression within religious life. The hermeneutic of reclamation is best equipped to fill this space. However, before unpacking reclamation in full, I must interrogate the hermeneutic of style, which offers several viable responses to the highlighted shortcomings of nitty-gritty.

*The Hermeneutic of Style: An Expanded Theistic Interpretive Device?*

Style is understood in his hermeneutical framework as the "ebb and flow of the black creative impulse and the values and sensibilities that direct the historical movement
of black bodies and interests." As a device, style responds to and attempts to carve out a broader space for cultural expression, notably in the form of the arts, from within a Christianity framework. The emphasis on style thus grants entry into a fuller understanding of the impact of black cultural expression in the process of transformation and liberation. This hermeneutical mode is committed to investigating and unearthing black "genius in terms beyond the existential or doctrinal." It therefore accounts for the ways blacks have been religious, even ingenious, in establishing themselves as fully human as a basis what one might consider "normal" modes of religious expression within Black Church. That is, he calls for a genesis of the Black Church's doctrinal assertions. In positing style as the principle trope through which a broader capturing of black religious life can be had seems to necessitate a move to expand what might be included within a sectarian emphasis within black religious life.

Style prominently pinpoints the significance of bodily activity and aesthetic presentation as significant features in the process of securing liberation. The flesh, as it were, is the principle site where the stuff of life happens. Pinn offers a justification for beginning with the body as it represents "the major site of contestation, the space in which and upon which terror is manifest." This idea is not foreign to my current concerns. As we saw in part one, the social placement of the black body, that is, the way in which these bodies are situated in the antebellum context says something about their physical and social worth. I defined this theory of social placement in terms of "corporal constriction" in an effort the highlight the social machine and its capabilities in confining

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22 Pinn, Terror and Triumph, 141.
23 Pinn, Terror and Triumph, 188.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., 142.
and corraling black bodies within the slave system for use by the planter class. Within a discussion of a hermeneutic of style, however, the emphasis is placed on the individual body as flesh—which it does and how it responds to stimuli in an effort to present itself in a certain way. A hermeneutic of style seems satisfied with unearthing bodily and artistic expression to re-think back religion. Though fundamental to a conception of black religion, bodily movement and action is driven by something. The hermeneutic of reclamation offers the “something” that encourages movement.

Through a focus on style, “[b]lack religion amounts to a reconstruction of bodies by situating them differently, presenting or visualizing blacks to themselves and to whites in new, liberated ways.”\textsuperscript{26} Thus, with the emphasis and principal feature of style being connected to bodily movement and adornment, this approach to interpretation highlights life experiences as they occur through movement and physical display.\textsuperscript{27} The importance of the arts is connected to the body. Pinn’s examples of how this bodily concern by way of style gets played out is through the blues. The body thus becomes the very source material of injustice in the world and these ideas get expressed in the lyrical laments of musical expression. In this way, what the body exhibits and what it contributes to culture and social perception potentially creates a unique space where liberation can be seen in various forms. The body is the most central element of struggle and creativity, the element upon which all thrust toward liberation depends.\textsuperscript{28}

But what gives rise to this body’s movement and activity? What prompts and encourages it to respond to terror in either subtle or dangerously overt ways? What pushes it to make use of its internal genius to secure new and better space and greater life

\textsuperscript{26} Pinn, \textit{Terror and Triumph}, 142.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 142.
options? My argument is that a hermeneutic of reclamation better identifies the answers to these questions. That is, reclamation begins with the ideas extracted from experience and call to mind one’s perception of the body and the things affecting it. Reclamation’s fluidity doesn’t allow it to deny the implications of an embodied state—socially, corporally, communally, or physically. Thus it draws out ideas that both give a basis for embodied concerns and pushes for amending practices of the self, where the body is one of several elements of concern. Wherein style identifies isolated “acts” of representation, reclamation extracts ideas and physical action that give a basis for a revised presentation of the physical self. This is seen in reclamation as a fluid process of perpetual and daily activity. In short, the hermeneutic of reclamation identifies the acts of the flesh and perceptions of the self, as opposed to assuming these perceptions by way of the end result.

It is true that practices unfold through the body because of its connection to oppression. In response to the hermeneutic of style I may want to emphasize the difference as being one of “forms” liberation takes. That is, the hermeneutic of reclamation identifies self-amending practices (discussed in chapter four), which ultimately affect the body. For example, as we have seen, the hermeneutic of style points to the importance of the arts in connection to the body. From this assertion we are exposed to what the body produces in an effort to reveal, to the extent it can, liberation. But with a remaining concern with those things that may encourage the expression that the hermeneutic of style highlights, reclamation attempts to break open particular instances in history that reveal ongoing activity that, in the initial stages, not only encourages bodily action, but continually reinforces it.
For me, then, the importance of things such as declarative expression, the production of protest published materials on social and religious grounds, and the quest for literacy are important expression of reclamation. I consider these acts of protest and rigid critique of the status quo as the very things that mobilize bodily expressions of liberation. In essence, the hermeneutic of reclamation may best entail the extraction of liberative activity that principally places the body in danger (e.g., David Walker's *Appeal* or the enslaved person trying to gain literacy). I see these preemptive acts as an important form of religiously driven praxis to secure spaces where the body can ultimately have the freer expression of the style Pinn describes. Style presents an amended body while reclamation focuses on the amending process wherein the body is seen and ultimately recast as new. I see this as a fluid process of *be-coming* and *be-being*, reforming and forming. That is to say, this process doesn't just extract and change the wasteful products of oppression, it continually produces and attempts to form public opinion about that body.

Examples of reclamation—in this sense of perception and resulting physical action vis-à-vis the waste of subjugation—begin and end with the affects of socially and religiously formed language and culture regarding the body. I propose a casting of this idea in the form of a *liberative logos* for suffering blacks. The term *liberative logos* is used here to connote principles of divine reason and creative order in the unrelenting effort to express a life of wholeness. Driven by the *liberative logos*, the hermeneutic of reclamation, for example, accounts for the physical implications gaining literacy as an unfailing intimate desire for this logos. The ability to present the physical, communal, and social self differently through fiction and non-fiction publications takes the form of
the written expression of *liberative logos*. The physical act of declaring the self new or amended through is construed as the audible voice of *liberative logos* used as tool—in preaching and other forms of prophetic voice, etc. The changing of language about the physical and social self exhibits the process of changing the false or anti-*liberative logos*.

In illustrating my point I would like to return to the example of Baby Suggs Holy and her “down by the riverside” sermon at the Clearing. Whereas style pinpoints the concern for flesh and expressions of the flesh itself in free movement, reclamation emphasizes the declarative changing of language in the form of *liberative logos*, which gave rise to new bodily perception and, ultimately, freer movement of that body. Baby Suggs uses the very language of the enemy and identifies the ways that language is used for the enemy. But she simultaneously uses the enemy’s language as a tool, wherein the body is expressly misused and harmed, to subvert the enemy’s perception and ultimately its control of the body. Encouraging maltreated blacks to “love” their hands, the same hands that have been tied, bound, and chopped off, she expressly pushes for a new basic idea of black selfhood. This process begins with the declarative *liberative logos*, which emits self-amending qualities and dictum. As exhibited by this example, reclamation thus captures the broader spectrum of liberative activity, calling for a need to affect the logos pattern, or pattern of language, about the body as a first and overriding/governing task and fluid activity of liberation. In the end, style points to what blacks have done in, with, and through their bodies as liberation praxis within the context of religious experience. Reclamation distinctively identifies the pre, during, post, and ongoing activities that give a place for the embodied praxis style acknowledges. Reclamation, then, identifies a fuller expression of black religious life from the standpoint that the *liberative*
logos, with its ability to usher in changes in the enemy’s language and thus black bodily perception, becomes a marker of liberation.

I also want to focus in more detail on a couple of common concerns of reclamation and style as I give space for reclamation’s presence in the study of black religion. To be sure, reclamation’s basis and function is akin to Pinn’s hermeneutic of style, which requires an inclusion of cultural sensibilities and production that allow for and exhibit flourishing within different modes of human ingenuity. Therefore, the hermeneutic of style requires serious engagement as I make a space for reclamation. Certain elements of the hermeneutic of style are therefore important for the purposes of comparison: (1) a serious attempt to wrestle with and account for black cultural expression and (2) a coming to grips with history, both understood as devices of transformation.  

Established as the self-amending process discussed in chapter four, what we find here, by way of movement and posture of reclamation, are tactics of liberation employed by the subjugated to continually establish themselves as five-fifths human. In reclamation a resonant acknowledgement of pain and suffering exists, to be sure. But reclamation also entails the extraction of equally fluid activity to find and secure one’s positive place in the world and to ensure that that place is exhibited for all to see. I posit an idea of this fluid activity of cultural expression and production from declarative language of liberation. While scant, examples of black antebellum reclamation activity are available if we are willing to broaden our idea of what is an appropriate representative liberative religious activity. In this sense, by way of black declarative expression or attempts to change social consciousness through written works, reclamation perpetually

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29 Pinn, Terror and Triumph, 141.
pushes to express fully amended humanity through a myriad of activities. Such attention
given to reclamation points to a life force among the oppressed to continually labor to
practice any form of liberation, while being simultaneously driven by an overriding norm
of corporate liberation. Still, the emphasis in reclamation remains on the micro level of
activities that claim and project a whole and fully human black self.

History as a device of transformation requires a broader construal of how best to
capture that history. Pinn references a “concern for things and the perception of things”
as part of the process of capturing history. In reclamation this requires an extraction of
those things, grand or miniscule, that reflect being in its fullest and truest sense. Part of
what it means to reclaim is the idea of cultivation. That is, once one extracts the waste
and refuse of harmful formulations of religion and language, a cultivation process ensues.

A hermeneutic of reclamation, as Pinn asserts with style, contains a cultivation of
things and things perceived as fact and offers new perceptions of those things. “Things”
in this context are in nature the general expressions of culture and lived experience that,
for antebellum blacks, are varied and religiously complex. In this context, this religious
complexity even exists within Christianity as practiced by antebellum blacks. In
cultivating new perceptions of black self, reclamation deals with raw data of life in
whatever form, and fashions it. Part of the process is counter-hegemonic and in other
instances reclamation presents ideas of life and expressive culture that function
independently of a dialectical framework—that is, the reclamation process simply
expresses life without an oppressive reference point. In this sense, a hermeneutic of
reclamation also helps to produce a new language that captures the truer essence of
blackness and that contributes to the struggle for liberation through its transformative elements of declarative language.

A principle example of this *new language forging* process is found in the few examples where antebellum blacks were able to “freely” project their voices, not only in questioning the status quo, but also in relation to what it meant to be a human being. Whether in the form of far reaching published works or the everyday practices of securing literacy in the form of a religious task, the examples of reclamation are offered here as a series selected social dramas and historical-cultural snapshots by a multitude of “change agents.” My idea here is not to privilege the written text as the preeminent marker of reclamation activity. Rather, I am conveying that through the process of constructing their written works, in conjunction with their use of these works for the purpose of restoring a broken community of people, an important feature of reclamation activity is exhibited. These agents of change, as it were, represent the multitude of regular folk perpetually laboring to extract something better from life. Exemplars of these agents, among others, are Frederick Douglass, David Walker, Daniel Coker, and, on a general level, those antebellum blacks creatively laboring to “read letters.” While I will offer examples of their reclamation activity in chapter six, here I acknowledge clear and present distinctions between these exemplar figures with respect to “outcomes” of their respective freedom facilitating practices.\(^{30}\) What results within reclamation is a religious praxis that includes a component of celebrating the black self while simultaneously exploring ways to secure better treatment for blacks in general. In the end, reclamation

\(^{30}\) Coker’s work and ideas about the United States ultimately prompted his move to Africa, Walker seems to sanction the use of violence in response to slavery and argues for it as theologically justified, and Douglass questions the pertinence of the form of Christianity practiced by the slaveholding class and the efficacy religion for enslaved blacks.
desires the unearthing of a norm of liberation embedded in everyday free expressions of life in general.

Accordingly, part and parcel of a hermeneutic of reclamation is the position that cultural expression, varied in form, contributes to the transformation process. Yet, it also responds to the question of how one does this when facing the language and religion of the enemy. This process requires an extraction of hurtful and misleading conclusions about the oppressed but doesn’t merely identify them. Moreover, it exposes a method of securing a projection of creative expression within black religious experience.

Pinn’s construal of the hermeneutic of style does more than suggest a monolithic form of liberation. In fact, style is described as a method or tool indwelled with a norm of liberation, “which involves a moral indictment against restricted modes of ‘being’ and a vision for new life possibilities expressed through a full range of responsibilities an opportunities.”31 Of course, this idea assumes that at the core of black religion is a concern for liberation. At issue for many students of black religion, myself included, is the way in which this idea of liberation gets played out. In the last chapter I dealt with the extent to which liberation in the form of practices, suggested by Foucault as practices of freedom, could be conceived within black religious practices. Agency vis-à-vis sovereign authority over black bodies and social movement becomes an important issue to consider and hurdle of overcome. As Pinn would describe it, liberation is played out through “the development of a full range of life options expressed with all the privileges made available through proper exercise of democratic sensibilities.”32 Cone shows us then that our concept of black liberation through religious practices requires their

31 Ibid., 139.
32 Pinn, Terror and Triumph, 140.
conception in more than structural or doctrinal terms. Style, then, entails a move beyond restrictions of a social system bent on undermining black progress of free expression. With regard to style this form of expression is seen particularly in expressive and decorative culture, which include forms of dress and adornment, and in visual arts and literature.

So, a hermeneutic of style does in fact expand the possibilities of Christian expression among the black oppressed, and indeed these types of expression may well exhibit a form of liberation. Conversely, I seek to advance a tool better equipped to extract what may be considered the underbelly of oppressed black cultural expression wherein the stuff meant to harm are produced for new expression. That is to say, I require an excavation of liberation practices and expressions of an even riskier sort—expressions not expected from antebellum blacks (slave or free) who are perceived by the slaveholding class to have limited intellectual capacity, but also practices that most literally place these black bodies in danger of physical reprisal. Such liberation practices better capture the complexity and fluidity, even if subtle, of black religious expression intent on a full and complete expression of life lived. Unlike style and beyond suspicion, these practices entail a literal extraction from racist and biased cultural materials, something useful and fortifying for both the producer and receiver of that transformative expression. This is the idea of literally using methods and cultural tools used to harm or subjugate—in the form of biblical ideas, written documents, and the general denial of

34 See, Pinn, Terror and Triumph, 146-152.
literacy—and reclaiming such practices anew for black life expression. These practices are the stuff of the way I want to conceive of a new way to view the idea of liberation.

Liberation—that is, the general concept of it and the possible extraction of practices associated with it—requires my full attention as I differentiate these hermeneutical tools. The issue of liberation is central, as it is with the other hermeneutical tools herein critiqued, within reclamation. However, the hermeneutic of reclamation identifies a liberative or lifestyle of practices of freedom, even among a socially truncated people, as a more fluid-like expression. In this way, it better captures the liberative intent of oppressed Africans. Accordingly, through the hermeneutic of reclamation, over and against liberation, a unique read of black religious experience is offered that doesn't require the identifying isolated incidents of liberation practices, but exposes the black religious interpreter to fluid and perpetual reclamation experiences in the form of historical snapshots. Reclamation itself identifies liberation and liberation is a part of reclamation. That is to say, quite simply, reclamation points the observer to actions within history rooted in a norm of liberation, and a desire to openly live and express a whole and manumitted life. But not only this, reclamation itself—those actual incidents where the sufferer extracts social and religious ideas meant undermine or ruin their advancement—is an act of liberation. Reclamation is also sensitive to the shortcomings with respect to liberation as an idea needing proof of its existence. Therefore, its attempts to reveal liberative practices among oppressed blacks are meant to illustrate a changed posture leading to a consistent engagement with society and culture. As such, this engagement works endlessly maintain wholeness of life, without regard to specific outcomes.
Within reclamation diverse perspectives are drawn from the Bible to produce broad expressions of religious life more in tune with the complex lived experience of blacks. A reclamation move considers the results of what blacks draw from biblical themes. An example of what I am calling for can be found in Theophus Smith's "configurations" of the Exodus and Ethiopia biblical accounts. Smith speaks of these as "selected social dramas" that occur in different periods of black history. From these configurations the slaves, for example, created their own emancipatory praxis based upon their conceived hermeneutical framework. The resulting form of black spirituality is mimetic, not in the sense of literalistically imitating its models but by creatively transforming the biblical figures and themes while at the same time appropriating them. From the Exodus configuration Smith argues for corporate liberation efforts in the form of (1) ritual performances as dramatic reenactments of Exodus, and (2) archetypes of Moses figures among black leadership (e.g., Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman; Frederick Douglass). From the Ethiopia configuration the significance Psalm 68:31 is illuminated. The idea highlighted here fixes its attention on the mass conversions of antebellum blacks to Christianity. Smith argues for a figural grammar that springs from this experience and biblical reflection.

I want to consider, then, what (new & distinctly) antebellum blacks were drawing from the text—that is, reclamation pushes for an emphasis on the results of Smith's configurations, advancing toward particular expressions of religious life lived in complex ways. These actions illustrate and help to clarify the nature and function of the hermeneutic of reclamation. What results is a form of religious life continually seeking

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36 Ibid., 67.
distinction from the truncated life offered through subjugation. Again, I call attention to exemplar change agents and everyday general practices of liberation (or efforts to secure liberation) through attempts to gain literacy among slaves as examples of this "action," examples that will be taken up in more detail in the next chapter. In the end, these actions draw from diverse ideas about a fully lived life within so called "cultural snapshots" and "selected social dramas." Ultimately, they mark the work that reclamation does, to expand the corpus of understanding regarding the nature of black religious experience.

Seeking as well to change the nature of the conversation surrounding black religion, reclamation challenges suspicion by moving beyond a reactive posture while moving beyond a style formulation by demanding an excavation of modes nonconformity from within the context of black biblical observation and recasting social perception by engaging in the very "acts" of the enemy. Reclamation, however, should be conceived solely in dialectical terms or as "copycat" acts of one-upmanship vis-à-vis identical white actions. In other words, I am not positing a technique of finding actions to merely mimic. Rather, the actions associated with reclamation are those observed by enslaved and generally oppressed blacks as rights "endowed by the creator" but, due to racial authority, denied them. These subjugated bodies see the power associated with the activities of subjugation and seek to empower themselves through their own acts, which become the very form of reclamation practices of freedom.
Toward a Hermeneutic of Reclamation In View of Black Religious Experience

The hermeneutical device I offer here takes serious the oppressive elements of the socio-political reality that form religious action and thought. With that in mind, we must pay particular attention to lived religious experience. In part one of *Making the Wounded Whole* we did a considerable amount of work investigating the black lived experience in the antebellum South. Posited as corporal constriction, we identified the nature of black existence in general as confined in many harsh and tragic ways. From this extensive backdrop we have sought to excavate a unique hypothesis of black religion. Thusly poised our current task is to define the hermeneutical device that captures the nature of Christian religious experience among the corporally constricted black bodies described in part 1. In the lived religious experience of antebellum black Christians, I want to frame the discussion in terms of the multifaceted nature of religious experience—including creativity and cultural production. The quality of black religious experience as sacred differentiates it from other experiences, and is the form of the world through which this religious experience gains expression.\(^37\) I am interested in the everyday practices of black religious experience, which are not confined solely to corporate responses to tyranny. Accordingly, my work will reveal a scrupulous concern with selected "social dramas that may be occurring at any period in black historical experience."\(^38\)

I. Accounting for Black Religious Experience as a Basis for Reclamation


\(^{38}\) Smith, * Conjuring Culture*, 67.
Aligning with Wayne Proudfoot, I understand religious beliefs and practices to be interpretations of experience itself. Religious practices, seen as inextricably tied to culture, gives the outsider a chance to interpret and explain religious and even the social experience of a given group. In this way, religious beliefs and practices are interpretations of lived experience in that they attempt to make sense of and account for the phenomena and events that one confronts and the formations of their resulting behavior. While religious experience does not encompass lived experience in total, nor is it a unique mode of experience, it can shed light on experience in general where other modes of experience are not investigated or observable. And, given our current interest in the religious experience of the oppressed, actions that give insight into a group’s behavior in response to suffering begin to make clearer the meaning behind religious signs and symbols to the outside observer.

To center our analysis on the religious experience of African Americans during the antebellum period, our labor equally requires concern for explanation. Charles Long rightly points out that there exists a conundrum at the heart of the religions of the oppressed. This conundrum is one of orientation and the nature of religion. As a result, we are forced to account for the implications of the “twoness” and “othering” that

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40 Ibid., 43.
41 Given that religious experience must be interpreted in order to in any way be known, interpretation should in all cases be connected to the social and historical context of the people or group being interpreted. Tension, however, surfaces when we take the posture of explaining what we interpret and ascribe meaning to it. According the Proudfoot, the analyst of a given set of religious experiences must “cite, but need not endorse, the concepts, beliefs, and judgments that enter into the subject’s identification of his experience.” If the outsider proposes an explanatory hypothesis to account for the experience, he need not restrict himself to the subject’s concepts and beliefs. The interpreter must be careful not to offer his or her theory about the subject to overshadow the subject’s contextual voice to speak. Yet, all interpretation is implicitly explanatory. For Stanley Rosen this idea is the basis for hermeneutics being considered a political activity wherein meaning is determined by the interpreter without full account of the subject’s experiential context. See Stanley Rosen, Hermeneutics As Politics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2nd Ed., 2003).
42 Long, Significations, 165.
are a part of black religious experience—the reality of the effect of hegemony and oppression of African Americans. We are concerned with distinct modes of religious experience that identify, or perhaps demystify, the conundrum. The religious experience of the oppressed "and the forms of its expression reveal a critique of community and a fascination with the possibility and hope of intimacy."\textsuperscript{43}\textsuperscript{43} That is, the way blacks exhibit their lived religious experiences points to their innermost desires through that religion. That is also displayed is the nature of religion to bind the oppressed in a hope for something more, something else, without confining these actions to one religious orientation. Within the context of the silencing process of the oppressed, the challenge remains the excavation of religious experience and its application to other features of black experience.

Making use of Anthony Pinn's theory of religion, when we think of religion in general terms we are considering the ways in which humans respond to a crisis of identity, and thus the way in which that identity crisis constitutes a dilemma of ultimacy and meaning broadly construed.\textsuperscript{44}\textsuperscript{44} Religious experience in this sense, as a unique modality of human experience, is the key component is related to a seeking of answers to ultimate questions of life. But is our task to carve out an idea of religious experience among African Americans that harmonizes all religious orientations or one that separately accounts for religious distinction that would lead us toward a multitude of religious experience? As his hermeneutical formulations suggest, Pinn cautions against any notion that black religion is an exhaustive idea or one that can be captured within a single orientation such as Christianity. For him, the study of and possibilities for

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Pinn, \textit{Terror and Triumph}, 173.
understanding the nature of black religious experience pushes the observer beyond solely Christo-normative ideas. Marking this issue in terms of the study of black religion Pinn claims that while at times black religious studies has made concessions to "non-Christian" realities, the conversation effectively excludes other realities as anything more than elements external to the true focus of black religious experience—the Christian faith. In this way, Pinn critiques studies of black religious experience that are apologetic in nature, favoring one religious orientation over others, or offering a single orientation, implicitly or otherwise, as normative.

The challenge becomes what to call a distinctive Christian religious formulation that points us to "black" religious experience. Religious scholar Catherine Albanese contributes useful insights toward a naming and description of the distinct Christian mode of thought and experience herein described. In her book *A Republic of Mind and Spirit* Albanese pushes for a new trajectory in understanding American religion. Assessing what some would see as religious fragments or practices in the margins, from what would be considered (by more "orthodox" or evangelical strands of Christianity) heretical to the occult, she advances an idea of metaphysical religious practices as also normative and indicative of North American religious tradition. In her analysis, culture and associated practices are paramount in understanding the nature of this sort of religiosity. For her, these practices are seen as "metaphysical religion" in America. She uses the term "metaphysics" to connote an "American religious mentality (thought, belief, emotional commitment, symbolic & moral behavior) organized in terms of an identifiable set of

themes.\textsuperscript{46} Casting these metaphysical religious practices in aggregate, Albanese posits that the amalgamated nature of American religiosity, wherein distinct cultural practices function together, reveals insights regarding the nature of American religion. What is important to note is that this metaphysical understanding of American religion, is not completely disconnected or distinct from other forms of American religion. Rather, as its own trajectory, it is inclusive of other forms, including evangelical ones. Therefore, while it does not function dialectically "against" evangelical religiosity, it is an alternate trajectory while simultaneously including evangelical religiosity as a part of its structural make up.

American metaphysical religious construed this way offers an alternative normative religious thrust that also has an evangelical element, but that element does not dominate or overshadow its other religious elements. Accordingly, even with evangelical elements subsumed, her metaphysical religious concerns lie outside of normative evangelical concerns surrounding sin and salvation. In fact, this metaphysical thrust includes desires toward healing and restoration of body or community.\textsuperscript{47} In focusing her discussion on early African American Christian converts, her metaphysical thrust seeks to understand the way religion works or functions for them.\textsuperscript{48} Through her framework, black Christianity in America becomes a part of this "metaphysical tradition" in that it isn't bound by traditional ideas of evangelical dictum. That is, black Christianity is a complex array of religious ideas, some African and others American, that shapes a religiosity that functions free of institutional constraints. In this black Christian

\textsuperscript{47} Albanese, \textit{A Republic of Mind & Spirit}, 15.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 87.
metaphysical religious tradition religion functions through illumination, the otherworldly spirit communicating with the human spirit, bringing power and comfort to ordinary mortals.\textsuperscript{49} This idea becomes the basis for a more complex and messy Christian religious formulation that marks the nature of a reclamation hermeneutical impulse that uses whatever cultural, social, religious, or political tools necessary to reclaim and project a fuller black selfhood.

This form of Christian experience, in part, seeks harmony with nature, reveres ancestors, and rejoices in rhythm, while simultaneously acknowledging the full impact of chattel slavery and racial oppression.\textsuperscript{50} Such modes of spirituality are often odd or "othered" religious practices that fall outside an acceptable Christian framework. Over and above solely evangelical formulations \textit{Making the Wounded Whole} identifies what biblical scholar Cain Hope Felder calls "experiential sympathy" the blacks have with much of the Bible, "which in turn receives their reverent attention as quite literally the revealed Word of God."\textsuperscript{51}

With a rooted interest in black America, Pinn defines black religious experience as "the recognition of and response to the elemental feeling for complex subjectivity and the accompanying transformation of consciousness that allows for the historically manifest battle against the terror of fixed identity."\textsuperscript{52} I seek such an extraction of religious experience that moves the sufferer toward a new posture in the face of oppression—an empowered and hopeful stance that encourages radical critical and liberating activity against racial oppression. This religious experience is not the result of

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 89.  
\textsuperscript{50} Cain Hope Felder, \textit{Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class, and Family} (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 5.  
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 6.  
\textsuperscript{52} Pinn, \textit{Terror and Triumph}, 175.
overcoming or even, in the context of enslaved blacks, of manumission. Rather, experience as cast here finds worth in the struggle or activities toward a fuller lived experience. In truth, the oppressed are forced to deal with both the fictive truth of their status expressed by their oppressors, that is, their “second creation,” and the discovery of their own autonomy and truth—in the form of their “first creation.” And so, I frame my discussion of the “blackness” of black religion through the hermeneutical telescopic lens. Before moving to the core discussion of this chapter, we scrutinize the way in which one comports oneself toward and seeks in religion. Accounting for religion’s kaleidoscopic or multifaceted nature in relation to lived experience, I move toward the hermeneutic of reclamation as a way of capturing black biblical investigation and religious ideology more broadly.

II. On Defining the Hermeneutic of Reclamation

Within the context of slavery, biblical sensitivity is revealed in the slaves’ heightened awareness that the form of Christianity they had received from their enslavers failed to meet their social and existential needs. New Testament scholar Allen Callahan holds that African Americans have read the Bible as a text into which their complex traditions were woven. The Bible came to give explanation of the black sufferer’s inner world. Whether piecing together thematic snippets they had heard or, for those who were literate, reading for themselves, the religious posture that grew out of their biblical engagement thus “opened the prison doors” in the sense that it empowered the enslaved with a hopeful and declarative stance in the face of the absurdity of chattel slavery. In

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53 Long, Significations, 170.
accordance with this posture changing and empowering construal of the biblical message, the transformative power that accompanied a partnership with God then ushered in a more proactive stance for the slave against oppression. Gaining a "critical perspective of both their masters and themselves," it seems, advanced to slaves' proactive position in assessing the social affairs of the day. Exslave W. B. Allen embodies this empowered position in the way he responded to his enslavers,

My white master's folks knew me to be a praying boy and asked me—in 1865—when the South was about whipped...to pray to God to hold the Yankees back.... I told my white folks straight-from-the-shoulder that I could not pray along those lines. I told them flat-footed that, while I loved them and would do any reasonable praying for them, I could not pray against my conscience: that I not only wanted to be free, but that I wanted to see all Negroes freed!54

Perhaps fanciful outside of a religious realm, the slave, driven by a desire for freedom, was emboldened by their constructed concept of God.

Using this example as a backdrop, I posit that the most useful device to capture the nature of the religious life of the African American biblical observer is through a hermeneutic of reclamation—or, the process of reclaiming from the truncated lived experience of blacks empowering principles for an active and continual remapping of a corporeally constricted social reality. In Making the Wounded Whole I am paying close attention to antebellum black fragmented uses and extractions from the Bible to make sense of the transformative results of their biblical investigation. Within this study the transformative ideas are drawn from the Bible, to be sure, but these ideas may also be drawn from diverse sources of history and culture. Argued in this fashion reclamation is seen more broadly as a lifestyle among the oppressed that continually critiques,

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deconstructs, reforms, and refashions social reality. I am attempting to advance a
language capable of speaking of a quality of the American experience which, through its
harsh discipline, destroyed naïve innocence. According to Long, it is from this kind of
history and involvement with nature, humanity, and God that the dense richness
germinates out of which profound religious awareness emerges.

In this way, reclamation is both a process of extraction, as we have observed with
the hermeneutic of suspicion, and fluid activity of changing the social landscape through
a capturing of black religious awareness. The hermeneutic of reclamation entails a
drawing from life experiences and culture ideas and impulses that help to reestablish full
personhood and social order. In an effort reclaim, the oppressed seek a place within
society where their bio-political realities can be displayed as whole. In so doing, this
process continually pushes and advances the claim of humanity through cultural
expression, even where that humanity is stunted by racial oppression.

As we will assess in chapter six, the hermeneutic of reclamation is the actual form
that curative recalibration activity takes when in action. That is to say, reclamation draws
out an active posture that attempts to adjust and readjust, redefine, and reshape harsh
realities or realities that reject their full human worth. Reclamation searches for elements
of black religious life that reflect pro-activity in response to biblical themes. It argues for
the manifestation of this pro-active religious life in the way oppressed blacks expressed
their humanity through declarative rhetoric, free bodily expression, and attempts at
dismantling the way the black self is cast to society. In observing the slaves’ process of
extracting materials that aid in establishing a new personhood, reclamation argues for a

55 Long, Significations, 139.
56 Ibid.
transformative byproduct within this process—one of homeopathic cure. Thus, the hermeneutic of reclamation, understood in terms of an active lifestyle, uncovers the way blacks used tools such as the Bible, which were meant to harm, and turned its toxicity into a healing component. Cast as reclamation, we are exposed to some interesting attributes that the hermeneutic outwardly expresses.

*Reclamation As Homeopathic Activity*

The hermeneutic of reclamation points to a restorative/curative desire embedded within black biblical engagement. That is, through the refashioning involved in reclaiming, the Bible and its stories of freedom and ultimate victory over evil authority and precepts are culturally transformed for the purpose of resetting the social reality and thus healing the oppressed biblical observer. By definition reclamation entails *the extraction of useful substances from waste or refuse*. The “waste” in this sense is dually conceived as (1) the content of harmful biblical and socio-religious formulations by racist authority that deform the biblical narrative and hide its finer elemental themes of justice and freedom for all, and (2) as a result of biblical malformation, it may also take the form of truncated-corporally constricted black body. Within this approach, reclamation necessitates an active engagement to change the functionality of hegemonic uses of the Bible as well as the way the antebellum black sufferer makes liberative efforts to offer a new fuller understanding of the self. These ideas form what we would consider the “useful substances” drawn from waste and refuse. Reclamation distinguishes itself by way of a style of biblical engagement that brings in a complex array of cultural sensibilities that do not require strict adherence to a single mode of biblical hermeneutics.
Conservative or more evangelical modes, or even modes of interpretation that push solely to making claims about God’s intentions to liberate the oppressed, while part and parcel of reclamation, are not the sum of its transformative parts.

Reclamation As Cultural Refashioning Activity

Reclamation activity entails a fashioning of expressions, in our current example drawn from the Bible, that are also influenced by traditions, customs, norms, and cultural expressions that bring together the arts, visual culture, story telling and other spiritual sensibilities. Reclamation thus encompasses material themes drawn from folklore, social protest, the binding of black community, and biblical imagery as parts of a broader understanding of black religion. It seeks to establish what may seem to be an odd confluence of cultural ideas that shape a broader understanding the way the Bible forms life and action. Consequently, Africa becomes a useful site of expression and understood as a historical reality in the construction of black religious culture and experience.

Reclamation As a Dangerous Deployment of the Enemy’s Tools

The Bible, when influenced by everyday or folk cultural tactics of life maintenance, becomes understood prescriptively for a mapping of everyday life where the stain of racial oppression exits. Reclamation makes use of the tools—biblical, social, political or otherwise—meant to harm and readjusts them for transformative use. One example of this can be seen in the slaves’ mimetic extraction of the biblical figures. In what may be seen as homeopathic applications of the mimetic experience, the black
sufferer chooses to be involved in the process of curing racial violence and maltreatment toward the change of social policy. By “social policy” I mean any deployment of ideas about black existence in North America. While this idea will be applied in detail in the next chapter, I mark principle examples of this reclamation activity to be found in two important antebellum period black published works: a particular take on David Walker’s *Appeal* and Daniel Coker’s *A Dialogue Between A Virginian and An African Minister.*

These selected social-historical dramas or “cultural snapshots” will be highlighted as material manifestations of idea introduced in chapter four as the “dark marker” of black religion—the liberated human affixed to divine victor. I draw attention to “published” works of blacks for a reason. The mere fact that that these men were able to go against the odds and get these works published at all during the antebellum period bespeaks their empowered stance against the absurdity of racial oppression. More than this, the content the these works reveal a clear line of religious thought informed by biblical themes of justice, cultural identity, and liberation. Argued in this sense, the black sufferer engages in “free” and potentially dangerous expressions of ideas rooted in religious sensibilities and biblical formation.

Framing these works through the idea of reclamation, the machine in the form of Christianity, functioning according to an oppressor’s whims and desires, is restructured, sometimes in subtle ways, for use appropriate to the sufferer. In short, the black biblical observer reclaim(s) (extracts) the transformative features (understood as the useful substances) of the biblical/Gospel message lost through the imposition of extreme oppression (understood as the waste or refuse). This process is ultimately curative, resulting in a new posture in relation to a world where suffering exists.
Conclusion

In this chapter I introduced a new hermeneutic in the study of black religious life and thought. Drawing from and offering an analysis of socio-political experience and through an interaction with history, I have offered the hermeneutic of reclamation as a viable tool for capturing the nature of religious activity amongst oppressed African Americans, notably during the antebellum period. In full acknowledgement that preexisting methods of dealing with the historical realities of black maltreatment, the reclamation hermeneutic is offered as a way of extending the conversation about what it means to be black and religious in the context of the United States. Chapter six will flesh this idea out by way of application, arguing for the function the hermeneutic of reclamation takes when in action.

Our navigation began by placing the hermeneutic of reclamation among other interpretive devices of religion and culture. I attempted to carve out a space for reclamation by placing it within these additional approaches and showing the way it (1) extends the work of suspicion and, (2) broadens the way we view the complexities of black religious experience. A reclamation hermeneutic broadens the religious discussion without confining features and themes of cultural expression or the “rough edges” of life to spaces of investigation outside of the biblical context as the nitty-gritty hermeneutic does. Ultimately, I argued as well that reclamation, in a proactive position, moves beyond the reactive nature of a hermeneutic of suspicion by continually critiquing and engaging hegemony while simultaneously laboring to establish the worth and merit of their African American lives.
With respect to the hermeneutic of style we were exposed to some commonalities vis-à-vis the hermeneutic of reclamation. Even so, I labored to show the ways in which the hermeneutic of reclamation offers a more complete look at black religious practice and expression. Pinpointing the body as the primary site where the hermeneutic of style is most clearly observed, Pinn gives attention to isolated practices of liberation, such as the cultural production of art and bodily adornment. Reclamation, I argued, broadens our perspective in terms of what is at play as observable forms of liberation. Accordingly, I attempted to show that black religious expression with an eye on liberation begins prior to cultural production and is therefore a fluid driving force creating a space for bodily expression. What I push for is a grander capturing of everyday lifestyle among oppressed black where liberation is a norm and is seen in “acts” that place the body in danger. In so doing, the sufferer extracts and makes use of tools meant to stunt progress or obliterate altogether a full or whole black existence.

My next task took us through an unpacking of the issues surrounding religious experience in general terms. Ultimately, my analysis attempted to acknowledge a fuller scope of the varied religious experience of blacks in the United States. The goal in assessing the uniqueness of black religious experience was to attempt a coming to terms with the implications of black experience in modernity and its literal effects on the treatment of black bodies in the antebellum period. This grounding sets the tone for a capturing of what is “black” about black religion and, at least for my purposes, a basis for a hermeneutic of reclamation. From there I centered this experience in terms of the ways in which blacks approached the sacred text of the Bible in the process of creating transformative language and modes of being that reestablishes them as fully human.
Thereupon introducing the hermeneutic of reclamation—the process of reclaiming empowering principles for a remapping of a corporeally constricted social reality—we resolved in the end that reclamation earnestly extracts actions from historical data where the wounded and oppressed peoples labored to bring about their own healing. This activity to make oneself whole has an active component and function, which I term curative recalibration. Poised by way of a hermeneutic of reclamation, we now move to the close of Making the Wounded Whole, unpacking in my terms the nature and function of black religion.
Chapter Six

Curative Recalibration:

The Function & Nature of Black Religious Experience

The discourse of race is critical to the cloaking process and thus functions as a cog within modernity's own religious and quasi-theological machinery, a machinery intent...on producing bodies and people of a particular sort.¹

—J. Kameron Carter

...[A]gainst all accusations which may or can be preferred against me, I appeal to Heaven for my motive in writing—who knows that my object is...to awaken in the breasts of my afflicted, degraded and slumbering brethren, a spirit of inquiry and investigation respecting our miseries and wretchedness in this Republican Land of Liberty!!!!!!²

—David Walker

“What a writer is obliged at some point to realize is that he’s involved in a language which he has to change. For example, for a black writer, especially in this country, to be born into the English language is to realize that the assumptions of the language, the assumptions at which the language operates, are his enemy.”³

—James Baldwin

In chapter four we considered the underlying thrust to amend the self as fully human in the face the U.S. Constitution, and we described a self-amending process that

³ James Baldwin, A lecture from The James Baldwin Anthology, a film by Claire Burch.
seeks to change the socio-political idea of the black body’s value, pushing for a more fair and accurate portrayal of blackness. Chapter five then offered a way to identity these self-amending ideas in action. Accordingly, it offered a hermeneutical theory—one I call the hermeneutic of reclamation—to frame the way in which the self-amending idea is approached. My goal was to introduce the hermeneutic of reclamation and show the way in which the oppressed, through reclamation, have positioned themselves in an effort to bring about the amendment of a fuller, truer selfhood.

In this chapter I introduce a perspective on black responses to “a machinery intent on producing bodies of a particular sort,” as J. Kameron Carter alludes to above. It will thus reveal the spirit of inquiry among suffering blacks regarding their plight and their actions to change social, cultural, and religious language that sets the tone for their maltreatment. This final chapter draws directly from the hermeneutic of reclamation and connects that hermeneutical theory to my idea of the function of black religion. Quite simply, what I now offer is an application of the hermeneutic of reclamation. In this sense, chapter six unpacks and describes the very process of “changing” the dynamics and perceptions of black bodies, black meaningfulness, and blackness in general. I cast this changing activity in religious terms. Ultimately, I offer an application of the hermeneutic of reclamation by putting it in action in the form of the shorthand active phrase, *curative recalibration*. In the end, this chapter unveils a core of black religion, particularly within black Christianity, infused with an impulse to readjust hegemonic and racist constructions of black America through recalibration activity. This activity ultimately that has a curative underpinning and outcome.
Within this chapter I presume the idea that language, religious and otherwise, was used in adverse ways against African Americans during antebellum slavery. I will connect this idea to the study of black religion and its structure and everyday expression in relation to an effort to change social reality. The reader will also notice the connection I am making between language and religion from the standpoint of a desired and required change to a language that helps to reinforce healthy existence. In this sense, we will also appraise the merits of religion and its function as language itself. In addition, we will assess the way language is used to express harmful religious ideas, especially against antebellum blacks, and unpack black religious language and biblical appropriation used to counter maltreatment.

Accordingly, our analysis focuses on the change that must take place in religious language and within hegemonic religious convictions in general. Changing of the religion, impacted by social ideas of racial inferiority, becomes the basis for the central argument governing this chapter—that black religion is best understood in terms of curative recalibration. In curative recalibration I am speaking of the nuts and bolts activity to change (recalibrate) religion and accompanying religious language for use that begins the process of healing (curative) the black sufferer. This recalibration activity, working interchangeably with the idea of “changing” activity, is posited as a cultural activity to secure fuller life options for blacks during slavery. I find such drudgery among the oppressed to be a pervasive activity of engaging culture, politics, and society. I argue that those engaged in religious praxis during the antebellum period actively labor to change the socio-political structures that seek to undermine their human existence, and the religion they concoct functions as a changing agent.
I seek therefore to investigate and advance a “recalibrational spirituality” within black North American religious expression. A recalibrational spirituality within black Christian experience becomes a principle source through which we observe the creative elements of, for example, their biblical engagement in an application of the hermeneutic of reclamation. Conceived broadly, this form of spirituality accounts for the way theologian and ethicist Peter Paris frames the spirituality of peoples of the African diaspora, as metaphorically the soul of the people: the integrating center of their power and meaning.⁴ By “spirituality” he is referring to a common animating and integrative power that constitutes the principle frame of meaning for individual and collective experiences. For my purposes this assertion frames the basis of recalibrational spirituality among blacks, which emanates from shared experience as oppressed. As an ongoing and active engagement with culture and society, the recalibrating nature of this spirituality is seen in its push for better life options and fuller expressions of the black self. I see this as a fluid and dynamic interplay between both African and American cultural practices and sources in connection with Euro-Christian traditions. As we will discuss, this cultural synergy ultimately form a basis and essence of black Christianity herein described.

Within this project of hermeneutical recovery I desire what Theophus Smith suggests, a “restoration of the salvation-from-oppression dimension of redemption which has been neglected by Euro-American theologians, while reclaiming the element of corporate redemption found in folk religious expressions overlooked by black

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Thus, to capture what "God" could possibly mean in this bi-cultural matrix, I employ the term recalibrational spirituality to describe black biblical formation in North American. In connection with black cultural-biblical expression particularly during the antebellum period, recalibrational spirituality reveals the ways the oppressed were able to find utility in the Bible for religious formation and social transformation. This form of biblical utility encouraged the creation of better spaces of human fullness and facilitated a critique of racist formulations of religion and culture. While the read of black biblical engagement promoted here does not include the ways enslaved Africans also used it to make sense of their enslavement by way of justification, the scope of this project narrows the emphasis to counter-cultural forms of interpretation.

Curative Recalibration Defined

What I am attempting to reveal is a concept of a restorative/curative process within black religion whereby the subjugated self is changed to a new self. I speak of "recalibrative" activity in the sense that it is an active engagement, a push to (re)adjust precisely for a particular function. In the end, my argument will reveal a curative end to this recalibration activity. Important is the distinction between an act of calibration and what I argue for within recalibration. Consider for a moment a fully functioning machine calibrated for a particular function. Generally this calibration is constructed according to standard preset measurements for a proper function. And so, as long as this "proper" function is maintained, there is no need to calibrate the machine. However, should the machine's functionality change over time, perhaps due to general wear and

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torn or damaged, the technician will calibrate the machine to return it to its normal or
"proper" function. That is to say, when something goes wrong the technician resets the
machine to its original function.

Juxtaposing these terms, recalibration is an entirely different process. In this
sense, recalibration takes a machine that has, for all intensive purposes, functioned
"properly," according to the "original" intent. There is nothing inherently wrong with the
systematic function of the machine. The technician in this scenario endeavors to
recalibrate this machine in order to change its functionality in some way. To be sure, the
goal is not to change the machine or do away with it altogether. Rather, it is an attempt
to make use of that machine for a different, even desired function.

Recalibration activity within the black religious context in a similar fashion seeks
to change the functionality of hegemonic structures of Christianity. This activity entails a
readjustment of racist structures of Christianity and signifying activity performed by the
powerful against the powerless. Within this formulation recalibration is marked by
ingenuity in that it makes use of the tools meant to harm or subjugate and adjusts them
for transformative use. It is thence marked by messiness because it makes use of the
enemy's tools. The very machine (Christianity) functioning according to the oppressor's
"properly" calibrated function is restructured, sometimes in subtle ways, for use by the
oppressed.

Such activity reveals a similar sensibility found within what Anthony Pinn calls
"ethics of perpetual rebellion" on behalf of black bodies caught within the confines of
oppression. Within this realm, Pinn asserts that there exists "a continuing concern with
liberation from dehumanization, but it is understood that struggle may not provide the
desired results."\(^\text{6}\) For Pinn, success within this system rests within the process (of perpetual rebellion) rather than within a desired outcome. That is to say, though a particular outcome is desired, realization of this outcome need not ever manifest in order for success (as process) to be ascribed to the struggler or the struggle. This process is governed by a norm that facilitates and struggles for more. Liberation is the norm; perpetual rebellion is the process.\(^\text{7}\)

I assert that a curative element to this enterprise is the central element embedded within the nature of black American religion and biblical formation. Driven by a norm of liberation it continually defines and attempts to create space and manifest full expressions of life for those long suffering under racial oppression. This process is curative in that, whether or not it is sensible or explainable, it transforms the person or community and facilitates declarative action against oppression. To be sure, this recalibration is an activity, one with a desired end. However, the argument shall not fall short if the desired end is not realized because the basis for the activity is a constant striving for more. Consequently, applying the concept of curative recalibration becomes less difficult and at the same time it becomes more serviceable for understanding the function of black religion, whether the raw data analyzed is written or spoken. With the basis of this idea now laid out, let us separately unpack in a bit more detail its principle features: curative and recalibration. My goal therein is to give the foundation for this idea by showing how each component functions both independently while at the same time in harmony with the other in revealing the function of black religion.

\(^\text{7}\) Ibid.
“Curative” – Core Healing Sensibilities of Recalibrational Spirituality

The progression to the recalibration activity within biblical interpretation and religious interaction with culture and society begins and ends with healing sensibilities. What does this mean? The necessity to change language and religious ideology meant to harm by way of curative recalibration presupposes a desire and need for healing and reformation of identity. “Healing” is characterized here as a restored humanity on physical, social, cultural, and spiritual levels. Accordingly, I am advancing that idea of a healing thematic cord pervasive within the very fabric of black religious life and thought in the United States. But healing sensibilities indeed take various forms and their legitimacy is sometimes challenged on religious grounds. Consequently, before moving to a fuller analysis of the function of black religion with regard to the idea of curative recalibration, we labor with these sensibilities of healing, which, in the end, give the recalibration activity its curative end and nature.

I frame this idea of healing interchangeably within the context of religion. The question appropriately becomes, religion in what sense? As alluded to in previous chapters, I frame religion in terms of a striving or push toward a newly constructed identity. Considered in this way, the Christian practices described here entail a response to bio-political and socio-political realities of lived experience. Thus, through a recalibrational spirituality, black bodies are uncoiled from political and social constriction. This construal of Christo-religion entails black agency with respect to the process of pushing toward an end of racial tyranny. Yet, it acknowledges that the very people it aims to “liberate” have had their agency truncated in severe ways. Therefore, my formulation of Christianity is in agreement with Charles Long’s thesis in its emphasis
on "orientation in the ultimate sense" and thus "how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the world." In this way, religion is more than a structure of thought; it consists of experiences, expressions, motivations, intentions, behaviors, styles, and rhythms. This general construal of religion connected to the distinct Christian experience I unpack in this final chapter, therefore, is best understood as a conduit for the individual or collective body to actively respond to oppression by way of radical questioning and social action.

So, contemplating religion in terms of experiences and expressions gives the basis for only a part of my idea of religion. In charting historical paths toward ideas of healing within black culture and thought, religious scholar Stephanie Mitchem gives significant weight to the idea that healing practices are more than isolated actions. In fact, she argues that these activities, "are not simply healing practices," but that "they are likened to expressions of faith because they delineate aspects of a holistic epistemology." It is this pervasive nature of healing practices that captures my attention. Mitchem's work in African American Folk Healing "focuses on black Americans' concepts of health, illness, and healing in light of spirituality in order to better understand health practices." While this dissertation's aim will be to uncover how these healing practices actually shape faith and religious expression, the formulary of general African American health practices is also important.

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9 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 2.
As we reflect on our analysis in chapter two, which introduced a schema of the corporally constricted coiled prey as a central identifying marker of the antebellum back embodied experience, we now investigate the formative conduct within black healing practices. It might be argued that the culminating line of reasoning in Mitchem’s work is that “Black folk healing indicates how culturally African Americans act as agents in defining their own bodies, exerting some control over life, and constructing identity.”

Working backward from this thesis, we find compelling ideas regarding the nature healing practices and mindset in African American religious life and culture. The wellspring of this healing ideology flows through a complex array of cultural and traditional ideas among African Americans. Accordingly, we now highlight some uncommon features associated with healing sensibilities and the inherent messiness as they relate to black religious experience.

**General Construal of Healing Sensibilities & Cultural Challenges**

Language, with all prevailing issues and racial implications, forms for our purposes a basis for a general discussion on healing sentiments. Language forms the basis for a call for change precisely because without the required changes, the ideas, signs, symbols, and cultural perceptions it projects lead to the treatment we highlighted in chapters two and three. That is to say, language plays an integral role in the physical, socio-political, and spiritual life and livelihood of a people. Therefore, in the case of African Americans, language and countering language become the poles between which the struggle for human dignity and wholeness take place.

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Bodily wholeness was certainly an immediate concern. Both the planter and slave classes were affected by what was said of black bodies, whether in print or spoken form. Often what was written of these black "others" became stamped in the minds and actions of whites in America. Particularly in chapter two, we laid out the ways in which black bodies were corporally constricted. The physical manifestation of this constriction came in many forms, from the cutting off of limbs to the lynching of the body. Maltreatment in the form of painful experimentation on slave bodies during the antebellum period was also a rampant practice and formed the basis for much of the early medical research in the United States.

In uncovering healing sensibilities in response to the socio-political reality we must account for the complex issue of cultural messiness. In short, the antebellum slave population, just as the entire population of an infantile United States, represented a meshing and overlapping of many cultural norms. Historian Sharla Fett, in her book, Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slaves Plantations, figures appropriately that slaves nurtured a rich health culture, which encompassed ideas from Africa, Europe, and Native America. In fact, Fett very helpfully explores the complex history of slave practices of health and healing. She reveals that these practices were, at best, messy, not fitting into prescribed notions of "appropriate" medicinal practices of physical and emotional/psychological healing among the slave community. Paramount in her discussion is the role the oppressive realities of slavery played in the everyday coping mechanisms employed by the enslaved. Fett's ultimate argument is that enslaved African Americans were not passive victims of medical malice, nor were they helpless dependents on white health care. Black healing practices related to general well-being and healing that worked to counter daily abuse, whatever the form. Sharla M. Fett, Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Southern Slaves Plantations (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 2.
Inquiring into the inherent difficulties Denmark Vesey faced in antebellum Charleston, SC, Gomez uses this historical episode to shape his analysis of the messiness in forming African American identity from a confluence of “African” identities. He initiates his study by pinpointing the way in which the varied cultures of West Africa and West Central Africa endured in North American colonies, especially in Virginia and South Carolina, to which the largest numbers of enslaved Africans came. Set in the backdrop of Charleston, Gomez illustrates the monumental challenge Denmark Vesey was forced to overcome, a free black, to galvanize his “troops” to assist in a mass insurrection during the antebellum period. The challenge has less to do with spurring a large number of individuals—some slave, some free—to the cause. Rather, this challenge revealed the complexity surrounding both the merging of African and African American cultural norms and a coming to grips with the inherent differences that had the potential to thwart the planned insurrection. From this backdrop, Gomez positions his examination as one seeking to capture the means by which Africans and their descendents constructed collective identity in North America.14

Considering this dynamic in terms of healing practices, one can determine that there likely existed no centralized way of responding to physical maltreatment and abuse. For Fett, this complex array of healing practices and traditions “reinforces the case for the African cultural impact on North American enslaved communities.”15 The only thing that comes into focus, so to speak, is the blurred lines and invisible endpoints of these cultural practices. Accordingly, within the black Atlantic diaspora, captives connected to

15 Fett, Working Cures, 2.
Igbo, Yoruba, Bambara, Kongo, and others informed the black "New World" healing traditions being formed in the antebellum period. The fruit of the coming together or blurred cultural lines, as cultural theorist Paul Gilroy might alert us, is that it offers a cultural dimension within the black diaspora that strays from forms of essentialism that may deny the value of diversity, or too readily reject any form of "cultural commonality." The sort of balance herein sought places, for our purposes, emphasis on the merit of shared cultural sensibilities, even if they are partly drawn of sources meant to harm. From this position Gilroy offers a suggestion of the way religion is herein framed. Religion among African Americans, then, functions as a central sign of culture, through which they can unite in response to modernity's insistence that what is true and good was distinct from them.  

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16 With respect to this line of thought, the work of Paul Gilroy is paramount and requires more unpacking. Negotiating the lines between to several cultural domains, most notably African, American, and European, Paul Gilroy in The Black Atlantic argues for the convergence of these cultures as the construction of the "Black Atlantic." Within this domain a unique, even "other," personhood grows out of the shadows of Modernity. From this a cultural perspective is unearthed that transcends ethnicity. Within this frame of thought, Gilroy asserts the Black Atlantic as a single complex unit of analysis to produce an explicit transnational, intercultural perspective on modernity. The Black Atlantic framework Gilroy posits requires an active engagement with modernity by those who make up this paradigm. As such, the Black Atlantic engages in a praxis that endeavors to deconstruct the dominant hegemonic paradigm by creating space for itself. The "Black Atlantic," so considered, consists of a "hybridity" of culture wherein converging, though often dueling and unfinished, identities and sensibilities—including both African and European—become one complex entity. The text progresses through the various ways this praxis plays itself out. Important to consider is that this praxis seeks the full humanity of those who make up the Black Atlantic in response to the absurd within modernity. Modernity here should be seen as a line of thought constructed on racial grounds, which causes blacks (or any among a marginalized people) to be seen as "other" while at the same time perpetuating domination. Paul Gilroy, The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

Latter noteworthy scholarship weighing in on this discussion is theologian Theodore Walker and his work in Mothership Connections. Arguing for a convergence of two seemingly antithetical ideals, Walker presents an assessment of the Black Atlantic that deals with its complex structure. To that end, Walker offers a synthesis of neoclassical metaphysics and Black Theology as a Black Atlantic contribution to constructive postmodern efforts to understand and transcend modern worldviews and modern world orders. He identifies the populations which make up this Black Atlantic as including black Africans, Afro-Caribbeans, African Americans (North and South), Afro-Europeans, and other hyphenated black Americans. With such a diverse array of designations complexities abound with respect to the function and movement of this populous. See Theodore Walker, Jr., Mothership Connections: A Black Atlantic Synthesis of Neoclassical Metaphysics and Black Theology (State University of New York Press, 2004).
We may be encouraged to inquire as to the diasporic functional significance and philosophical underpinning of a singular mode of thought among a diverse population. In a useful fashion philosopher Paget Henry argues that, within the Afro-Caribbean context, philosophy is discursive, marked by an intermingling of philosophical perspectives. In this sense, it is shaped by what he calls "colonial problematics." While colonialism has the ability to stymie progress, an interesting outcome occurs. According to Henry, the religious aspects of an Afro-Caribbean Philosophy results from answers to questions of origin, nature, and purpose of being.\textsuperscript{17} What seems clear from this characterization is that the outgrowth of a diasporic line of religious thought functions both within and grows out of a dialectical arrangement between entities. The residual effects of slavery, then, play a principle role in the need and construction of a thread of thought that challenges black folks' lot in life. The question becomes how such considerations legitimise the function and utility of religion.

I find Henry's colonial problematics useful as a way of approaching this project's concern with the outgrowth of religious thought from cultural and societal mesh. The byproducts of living within a culture where the assumptions of its primary language are the enemy of black culture and enfranchisement are seen in all aspects of life.\textsuperscript{18} We have


\textsuperscript{18} By way of an example in the study of Santeria, George Brandon also queries what remains of religious meshing. Acknowledging Yorубan religious underpinnings, he argues that Santeria is to be understood in a transatlantic context. The components of Santeria in the Americas can include a blend of European Christianity, traditional Africa (orisha worship within Yoruba), and even Kardecan spiritism (France). Santeria is found most prominently in Cuba and the Eastern U.S. Practice involves, then, not the retention of purely African religious tradition but rather the convergence of such traditions with other religious orientations within the context of adjustment to New World circumstances. Ultimately, he argues that African orientation could only be maintained when the carriers were isolated and their behavioral expressions did not conflict with the cultural-behavioral elements of the dominant "host" society. Collective memory is therefore seen as fragile and, because it is largely at odds with the host society, syncretism can never truly be gained because of cultural contradiction. See George Brandon, \textit{Santeria from Africa to the New World: The Dead Sell Memories} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 128.
laid out this issue in relation to language use and the role it plays in physical maltreatment but it also affects socio-political placement and, ultimately important here, spiritual wellbeing. As previously taken up, the socio-political and bio-political influence on black bodies came in the form of the corporal constricted of a people understood by this author as the coiled prey of antebellum society. Language is best captured here as the starting point for the foul treatment experienced within such a social status. Language fuels the way a people are socially perceived and ultimately the way they are treated. Accordingly, religion and religious language work together in the process of producing the desired healing and wholeness of a wounded people.

On the level of the spiritual, healing sensibilities manifest themselves through desire for spiritual wholeness and a binding of community around shared struggle. Gomez identifies the importance of early African American conversions to Christianity as ultimately facilitating the transition to race. He reasons that it “was primarily through those properties that allowed for differences among and between the African and the country-born to be bridged in an effective manner. At the same time,” he adds, “race influenced religious beliefs within the black community and the African antecedent continued to inform…”

It may therefore be appropriate to align with ethicist Peter Paris, who lays out an ethical groundwork for capturing the traditions of African peoples both on the continent and in the diaspora, revealing that they are diverse in cultural form yet united in their underlying spirituality. “Spirituality” in these terms will refer to a common animating

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19 Gomez, Exchanging Our Country Marks, 15.
and integrative power that constitutes the principle frame of meaning for individual and collective experiences. Spirituality is thus metaphorically the soul of the people: the integrating center of their power and meaning. Spiritual mingling among antebellum blacks, though messy, assisted in the process of binding and encouraging a distinct religiosity, which this work has attempted to unfold. Healing sensibilities of this people, living as the coiled prey of society, seek, partly through language, to amend themselves anew. We now set a course to chart an analysis of the process taken to change the language and amend the self—making oneself whole.

“Recalibration” – Mechanics and Style of the Work to Change

Having discussed the internal curative make up of recalibration activity, we move now to the “nuts and bolts” analysis governing this project. Here we concern ourselves outright with the way religion works for African Americans. That is to say, we pay closer attention to tools used and their methods to acquire them. Healing sensibilities, as I have laid them out, govern the task, but wholeness, the end result of healing, is also a norm pervading the liberative action. All of these dynamics have interplay for African Americans toiling to change language, and thus ideology, culture and society. Therefore, we might say that healing sensibilities are fluid in that they exist at all and even encourage recalibration tactics but also form the basis for an end result of recalibration efforts.

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21 Ibid.
Recalibrating Culture By Way of the Bible – Black Biblical Interpretation

I begin this section by reiterating an important distinction. In chapter five I introduced the hermeneutic of reclamation, submitting it as an interpretive tool for use by interpreters of black religion, considered broadly. In deploying this interpretive tool the investigator uneathrs religious practices and expressions among oppressed blacks. As advanced in that chapter, a principal way the idea of reclamation gets played out is through an assessment of black biblical interpretation and resulting formation. That is to say, reclamation as a hermeneutic tool, in part, uncovers certain perspectives and actions from within communities of African American biblical observers. The biblical discussion in this chapter uncovers the style the nature of that biblical observation, placing it in action. In short, I now employ my own hermeneutic of reclamation through an extraction of black transformative biblical interpretation from the waste and refuse of hegemonic uses of the Bible by the antebellum planter class. Accordingly, curative recalibration represents the action and liberative religious praxis that the hermeneutical tool of reclamation seeks to uncover.

What the reader will notice is that I see black biblical engagement as rooted in recalibration activity. Thus, we build on the discussion of African American biblical contact as part of the self-amending process uncovered in chapter four. Here I am making a clear assertion that the Bible is central as partly homeopathic, partly talismanic, and at all times restorative tool in black interactions with society and cultural formation. In the process of amending the self, the sacred Judeo-Christian text was excavated to assist those told they were “less than” to reestablish themselves as five-fifths, or fully human. For our current and connected ideas, we couch the style of this process in terms
of recalibration. In so doing, our focus shifts to the actual way the Bible is used to uncover self-amending notions.

The problem of identity for colonized and enslaved societies is the same issue of consciousness, but it is not simply an attempt to create a new consciousness among oppressed but a new form of human consciousness and thus a new historical community. Accordingly, biblical interpretation among African American sufferers becomes a broader task of changing the language of the culture with respect to black identity. In approaching the Bible in this way, the oppressed must deal with the "fictive truth of their status as expressed by the oppressors, that is, their second creation, and the discovery of their own autonomy and truth—their first creation."  

What is being expressed herein is that biblical contact is tied to experience and thus culturally formed. Thus Scripture becomes a constructive bridge connecting divine hope to cultural and bio-political lived experience. Thus the Bible is not a static text functioning independent of time and place. Rather, it breathes life into and ultimately draws from the experiences of the people in history in terms of its appropriation. Thus, the Bible itself is embedded in a variety of cultural contexts and reflects the influences of its social settings. The Bible has been made relevant to its interpreters throughout different dispensations of history, whether its observers were acute exegetes or simply nascent readers. Therefore, experience accompanies and even informs the assumptions drawn from the text and creates a dynamic interplay between what is believed and lived.

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22 Ibid., 168.
23 Ibid., 170.
In interpreting a peoples' biblical hermeneutic I am endeavoring to unearth a basic make up or nature within black religion. Vincent Wimbush argues that the "survival of Africans meant learning to assemble cultural pieces from radically and involuntarily shattered social-cultural experiences, from rupture, disconnection.\textsuperscript{25} Accordingly, connecting fragments of cultural life meant the very survival of a wounded community. The Bible offered communally binding qualities in that its themes of triumph bolstered hope and offered speaking points to rally around. In this sense, sacred texts are as much determined by society and culture as society and culture are determined by sacred texts.\textsuperscript{26} This does not mean however that what exists is a seamless or neat relationship between African Americans and the Bible. On the contrary, what we face is a messy, often acrimonious, connection, which is forced to consider a myriad of presuppositions and the reality of the Bible being used by the planter and slaveholding classes as a religious language of oppression.

The activity of recalibrating the Bible, as I have mentioned, entails a restructuring of racist formulations of the scriptural text.\textsuperscript{27} In so doing, blacks are positioned to face


\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{27} For an extended study to the significance of race and culture with respect to African American interpretations of the Bible see also the work of Cain Hope Felder and Brian Blount. Blount advances a compelling argument with respect to the nature of black Christian experience in the face of suffering and oppression. Assessing the utility of the book of Revelation in light of black suffering he posits that the oppressed struggle not as passive victims, but as active witnesses to a transforming lordship that transfigures believers and their world even as they witness to it. This is the interpretive function of the witnesses for slaughter under the alter or the beheaded one's in chapter 20 whose "[w]itnessing to the lordship of Christ causes their physical deaths." Accordingly, dire suffering for African Americans in Blount's assessment becomes a fact of human and religious experience but not the culmination of the story. The sufferer actively engages society and culture as well as sovereign authority as they seek triumph through religious means. See Brian K. Blount, Can I Get a Witness?: Reading Revelation through African American Culture (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 59; and Brian K. Blount, Then the Whisper Put on Flesh: New Testament Ethics in an African American Context (Nashville: Abingdon Press,
what New Testament scholar Allen Callahan asserts as the Bible being used as a “poison book.” He states that the Bible “was also a poison book. Toxic texts in the Old Testament seemed to condemn Africans and their descendents to slavery because they were Africans.” We have elsewhere discussed specific examples of this biblical poison but what we currently take note of is the reality that some blacks initially seemed to accept the text. Ultimately many African Americans did embrace the Bible, a poison book, because, as Callahan posits, “it was so effective, in measured doses, as its own antidote.” Such a homeopathic perspective sheds light on the idea that African Americans’ relationship with this sacred text is messy, even odd in certain instances. Yet, while the Bible offered both toxicity and healing, blacks could not lay claim to the healing balm without braving the poison. Like the modern day flu shot, wherein a modified dosage of the influenza virus is injected into the body in order to counteract (cure) the onset of the virus, they sought cure racist formulations of the Bible and, by extension, Christianity. The antidote to racist uses of the biblical narrative was more recalibrated biblical narrative, offered as a homeopathic cure to racist textual formulations. The result was a biblical language fortified to affect transformative change. From this level of biblical interaction, the cultural facilitation of the curative sentiment is revealed.


29 Ibid., 39.
30 Ibid., 40.
Cultural & Curative Implications in Biblical Recalibration

The prophetic biblical text Jeremiah offers a grounding for our discussion. In speaking on behalf of the people of Israel, the prophet Jeremiah inquires,

*Is there no balm in Gilead?*
*Is there no physician there?*
*Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?*

Gilead, which stood east of the Jordan River, was a source of healing balsam. Paradoxically and rhetorically Jeremiah inquires on behalf of his people why their afflictions continued when a source of healing was nearby. Judah had been suffering in the wake of forthcoming judgment. Yet Jeremiah, who ultimately prophesied of God’s restoration, saw fit to inquire of God for the sake of God’s people to restore them straightaway. Ultimately, Jeremiah sought the help of the Great Physician to remove the sufferings of the people. Interestingly, God, it could be argued, called for human ingenuity to secure curative relief for their sufferings. They were to take affirmative steps to end their pain. Paradoxically, one could argue here that Jeremiah himself called for human ingenuity to be applied to Judah’s dire plight. In short, it was a call for Judah to affirmatively seek for themselves certain relief and change, within and partly without of the sovereign move of God.

This biblical account highlights several interesting insights for our inquiry. First, it offers a general premise that governs the concept of curative recalibration. Throughout our investigation we have at different stages examined the ways blacks have interpreted and appropriated this biblical text vis-à-vis suffering. Suffice it to say, this sacred text has played a role in the ways they sought to ease their pain. Secondly, however, this idea

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31 Jeremiah 8:22 (NRSV)
feeds this analysis in the way their biblical appropriation may also be viewed—as a call for human engagement, in partnership with God, to end suffering. This engagement required, as its paramount goal, a cure of oppression for the people. It involved a use of human and divine tools to bring about positive change—recalibration in the sense argued here. The backdrop to our theoretical framework is the history of struggle, oppression, and dehumanization forced upon blacks in North America.

As observed in the work of Theophus Smith in chapter four, the biblical wisdom embedded within African American biblical interpretation is a “radical questioning” of the status quo. This form of questioning allows the subjugated to ask theodical questions regarding their existence and belief and trust in God. The results are radical critiques of religious experience constituted in biblical books like Job (theodicy) and Ecclesiastes (resignation), for example. The radical questioning of the status quo is but one element of Smith’s formulation of black biblical formation.

The second element of this black biblical formation is a curative intention (as material medica) within conjurational performances, which employ biblical figures for the purpose of transforming lived experience and social reality. This performance itself acts as a curing agent. As waged against Christianity itself—read here as the problematic machine needing recalibration—curative recalibration engages in bold activity. What results is the task of curing racist Christianity as a “deformed cult: that is, healing Christianity itself of its deformation as a religion of sacralized violence that is contrary to its own gospel origin.” Such a recalibration of Christianity itself emboldens (cures) the black religious observer to radically question his or her lot in life and perpetually rebel

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32 Ibid., 142.
33 Ibid., 18.
34 Ibid., 184.
through a push for change. Further, reenvisioning of social reality in this manner brings to light the internal mechanisms found within curative recalibration.

The central thrust of re-envisioning by way of culturally infused religious practices becomes the stuff of curative recalibration’s transformative thrust. Conjuring a God or a world that is more suitable for the safe and comfortable existence of black bodies means the extraction of religious ideas that take a different shape than strict evangelical ones. Curative recalibration is prescriptive and medicinal. It is a dynamic restructuring of racist machinery that isn’t limited to restrictive methods to bring about change. Through curative recalibration the oppressed identify uses of language and religion that are inherently harmful but doesn’t seek to completely do away with language or religion. Rather, it conjures a new religious thought from within, that is, among the oppressed, which positions them differently in the face of suffering. Again, observable results need not be the measuring rod of success in curative recalibration. It reveals a fluid lifestyle of perpetual performances that are simultaneously proactive and reactive. Upon reaction it adjusts position anew and establishes black culture, ideas, and sensibilities that continually labor to establish the black body and self as a full and amended human self. To illustrate this point I move to an assessment of varying ways curative recalibration has been exhibited in black historical and religious experience.

Curative Recalibration in Action – Engaging the Language & Religion of the Enemy

This section offers an application of the reclamation hermeneutic discussed in chapter five. That is to say, I now utilize reclamation as an investigative/interpretive tool, identifying instances where reclaiming “action” can be seen. Reclaiming action, as I
have maintained, comes to us in the form of curative recalibration. Accordingly, I now want to identify instances wherein recalibrational spirituality might be observable in black cultural and religious life. I will assess its function within black declarative language. I mean by "declarative" the act of making an affirmative and emphatic statement regarding one's being or existence. This statement is meant to redefine (change) signifying statements of the oppressor meant to keep the oppressed in a lower social position. Therefore, such statements are religious in that they seek to establish the speaker as fully human in light of counter social constructions that may project the opposite.

My illustrations of the antebellum curative recalibration activity unfold in various forms of cultural contact, spanning notions of religion and religious experience, socially transformative, and the political. Accordingly, I have selective representative "historical case studies" to analyze and illustrate the way curative recalibration unfolds. The individuals included in these case studies vary from the slave (utilizing narratives) to the published texts of free blacks. Admittedly, I have chosen to make use of several individuals who may be considered the "elites" of antebellum black society. While I recognize the possible shortcomings of such a choice, as they cannot possibly fully speak for people who, at least in the South, were largely held as slaves. However, I believe that representative figures like Frederick Douglass and David Walker both appropriately and accurately tap into the "pulse" of antebellum black society in general. This pulse, as it were, is cultural and thus experiential. This pulse thus reflects and is driven by the shared freedom struggle of African Americans, whether free and literate or in servile bondage on the plantation. These figures are able to tap into the nature and broad spectrum of black
suffering and oppression because in varying ways they too lived it. Accordingly, emphasis on their cultural critique should not solely be placed on the significance of the written text as the medium of expression. Rather, the conveyances and sentiments of what is written should be the way we assess their connection to the larger antebellum black community.

What I will unearth by way of these figures are general examples in the form of historical snapshots of antebellum black appropriation techniques where the change of language becomes particularly transformative. While not an intrinsically "religious" encounter, I begin with the way in which Frederick Douglass engaged the U.S. Constitution around the issue of slavery to illustrate the style of investigation and cultural contact I describe as curative recalibration. Upon establishing this "style" of cultural interaction through Douglass' thought and action in his assessment of the U.S. Constitution, I will move to a broader examples of this form of engagement through dueling conceptions of the Divine and David Walker's two central contributions to curative recalibrational thought. What will become clear is the way this activity attempts to raise the oppressed into a more fully human position by adjusting words and associated activities or ideology to better reflect their worth and personhood. From this process comes the paramount schema of healing in connection to identity formation, or my idea of wholeness. What results is an amended posture in the face of suffering that makes whole the wounded black body and soul.

Case Study #1 – Recalibration as General Practice: A “Style” of Textual Appropriation
An important example of cultural and social engagement within the U.S. political system is Frederick Douglass' investigative odyssey with the U.S. Constitution. This historical account grants us an example how curative recalibration works and unfolds within social public discourse and action. In doing this I am inquiring about how one changes—that is, recalibrates—the language of hegemony and the ways this language can be subverted for a more transformative and positive use for blacks who suffer under the brunt of extreme oppression. Such an inquiry suggests not only that there is a liberating meaning embedded somewhere within the text waiting to be excavated, but also that the interpreters' goal in investigation is to find one. An instructional example is seen in Frederick Douglass and the progression of his interpretation of the U.S. Constitution. I access his interpretive strategies of the Constitution as an illustration of restorative sensibilities fueling curative recalibration.

During the antebellum period Douglass sought to come to grips with the language and efficacy of the Constitution with respect to the issue of slavery. He once held that even if the Government has been governed by mean, sordid, and wicked passions, it does not follow that the Constitution is mean, sordid, or wicked.35 Such a line of thought fueled his position, in a break from the pro-slavery ideology of William Lloyd Garrison, that the Constitution was inherently an anti-slavery document. This disconnection between human intent and literary content was a key and telling one. Early in his abolitionist years Douglass held fast to Garrison's rhetoric of "Disunionism." Garrison's belief was that the U.S. Constitution was essentially and irrevocably a slaveholding

document.\textsuperscript{36} For Garrison there was no question as to the direction an abolitionist must go. Anything less than the total rejection of the Constitution and the union would fail to extirpate the evil of slavery from the land once and for all.\textsuperscript{37}

Early in his abolitionist career Douglass interpreted the Constitution "as a most foul and bloody conspiracy against the rights of three million of enslaved and imbruted men."\textsuperscript{38} This view was driven by his personal suffering, which made the Garrisonian doctrine initially appealing. However, through his continued study of the Constitution in light of its written language alone, his interpretation began to distance him from the Garrisonian doctrine. Douglass' interpretive strategy becomes a useful illustration for our current purposes. The preamble to the Constitution offers the initial interpretive nugget Douglass uncovered, which began to alter his view of the document. Beginning with "We the people" the preamble sets forth a norm that exists almost irrespective of the intent of the Framers of the Constitution, even if they were driven by a different norm— one of state's rights and the maintenance of the slave system in the South.

Douglass' constitutional inquiry, then, asks, what "norm" was established by the phrase, "We the people?" In this sense, he was forced to grapple with what the Framers (of the Constitution) would have understood by this phrase. One can interpret the text of a constitutional provision in a different sense of the term, however. That is, "[o]ne can inquire what norm the provision in question is now taken to represent—or what norm it shall hereafter be taken to represent."\textsuperscript{39} Thence, extracting the originally intended

\begin{footnotes}
\item[37] Ibid.
\item[38] Philip S. Foner, ed., \textit{The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, Vol. II} (New York: International Publishers, 1950), 51.
\item[39] Ibid., 27.
\end{footnotes}
meaning is a challenging task. This too implies that the norm could, in a sense, be
cultivated over time. However, cultivation may not change the Framer’s intentions
within the text. So, debates arise as to whether or not there could ever be a “fixed”
meaning within the Constitution.

Thomas Jefferson adopted an insightful principle for engaging the Constitution:
that the Constitution should be liberally interpreted where human rights are involved. ⁴⁰ It
could be stated that Frederick Douglass ultimately subscribed to this notion. Regarding
his interpretation of the Constitution, Douglass insists that,

“the mere text, and only the text, and not any commentaries or creeds
written by those who wished to give the text a meaning apart from its plain
reading, was adopted as the Constitution of the United States. It should
also be borne in mind that the intentions of those who framed the
Constitution, be they good or bad, for slavery or against slavery, are to be
respected so far, and so far only, as we find those intentions plainly stated
in the Constitution.” ⁴¹

Influenced by this notion, Douglass shows that when approaching the Constitution the
interpreter ought not to seek to understand the Framers’ intent or any other interpreters’
construction of meaning for that matter. Interestingly, the author’s intent, based upon his
or her historical context, is often understood by interpreters to reveal “true” meaning of a
given text. So, if the Framers “intended” for slavery to remain a viable institution in the
South according to their historical context (wherein there was a vibrant economic need to
maintain the institution), the Constitution is a pro-slavery text. Douglass’ latter argument
is the opposite of this view because their proslavery intentions are absent from the
finished text. ⁴²

⁴⁰ Miller, Race Adjustment, 228.
⁴² Ibid.
What I am suggesting is that Douglass employed the curative recalibration tactic in his re-read of the U.S. Constitution. His instance, part of his argument involves the appeal to textuality and the concomitant ability of any reader of the English language to grasp the meaning of the "simple text of the paper itself."43 He seems, then, to let the Framers off the hook, so to speak, if, in fact, they did intend to maintain the institution of slavery. The fear, here, is that interpretation could easily become invention because the meaning could be seen as unfixed.44 Implications of fixed versus unfixed meaning signify the problematic nature of interpretation for some scholars of hermeneutics.

Given Douglass’s style of interpretation, what should be said about his transition in thought about the Constitution as a pro-slavery to an anti-slavery document? Drawing a connection to the Jeffersonian interpretation mentioned earlier, Douglass’s interpretive strategy incorporates certain rules of interpretation: First, “[T]he language of the law must be construed strictly in favour of justice and liberty.” Second, “Where a law is

44 Among others, Rudolf Bultmann inquires into this inherent challenge of hermeneutics. For Bultmann, how one comes to grips with the inherent challenges to capturing meaning for a prior set of people and historical context is the central “problem of hermeneutics.” Accordingly, Bultmann considers ways one might successfully (a term I would use loosely here) navigate, as it were, troubling interpretive waters. His conclusion, which is helpful in conceptualizing Douglass’ progression, is that the interpreter’s presuppositions are in fact direct connectors to a previous living relationship with the subject. Accordingly, he argues, the interpreter approaches the material with similar concerns as the original subject. In short, every interpretation is necessarily sustained by a certain prior understanding of the subject, which lies under discussion or in question. (252) The interpretive succession thus includes common interest (in Douglass’ case, the common understanding of the norm of human freedom established by “We the people”), which influences the nature of the inquiry and direction of the investigation. The object of interpretation can be established by mutual interest in history as the sphere of life in which human existence moves, wherein reflection upon which offers the possibility of understanding. (253) See Rudolf Bultmann, *Essays: Philosophical and Theological* (London: SCM Press, 1955). See also Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics As Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, 2nd Edition).
susceptible of two meanings, the one making it accomplish an innocent purpose, and the other making it accomplish a wicked purpose, we must in all cases adopt that which makes it accomplish an innocent purpose." 45 These rules of engagement would allow him to establish his antislavery reading of the Constitution.

As a corollary to this new understanding for the need for union, Douglass affirmed the Constitution as a guarantor of equality and of civil rights. 46 Central to Douglass’s shift in thought about the Constitution was his understanding of the Preamble and its significance. Douglass comments that he had “arrived at the firm conviction that the Constitution, construed in the light of well-established rules of legal interpretation, might be made consistent in its details with the noble purposes in its preamble,” and that in the future he would insist that the Constitution “be wielded in behalf of emancipation.” 47 Such “legal interpretation” yielded strict and promising outcomes for the efficaciousness of the Constitution for African American use. Later, Douglass references the great document as one that ought to be interpreted as “a glorious liberty document. Read its preamble, consider its purposes. Is slavery among them? Is it a gateway? Or is it a temple? It is neither.” 48 His formal conclusion on this point was that he had “arrived at the firm conviction that the Constitution, construed in the light of well established rules of legal interpretation, might be made consistent in its details with the noble purposes avowed in its preamble…” 49

46 Williamson, The Narrative Life. 100.
47 Foner, The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, 54.
Finally, Douglass' interpretative shift allowed him to move to a final conclusion that it was an anti-slavery document. Under the influence of Garrit Smith, he concluded that the most effective way to engage tyrannical uses of language was to recalibrate it, allowing it to function restoratively. In this sense, Douglass took the restorative language of the text on its face and according to its own merits, without regard for the Framers' intentions, whether bad or good. Accordingly, for him the Constitution was directed against slavery since "human government is for the protection of rights." Even if the framers of the document had asserted the right to enslave human beings, it would not have the binding authority of reasonableness.\(^50\)

The Constitution was for him a fixed document as constructed. He, therefore, sought its grand intentions of general freedom and applied those general principles to all Americans, blacks included. Douglass concludes, "...since the U.S. Constitution was established to secure the blessing of liberty, there is, therefore, a high constitutional, as well as moral obligation, resting upon the American people to abolish slavery."\(^51\) Skillfully, Douglass uses the words of the Framers and "We the people" (though neither originally included or had any regard for blacks as citizens) against them. Even if they constructed it for white freedoms only, given that the language did not specify such, Douglass reasoned that the freedoms it established were available to blacks until someone proved otherwise. I argue that Douglass' interpretive transition offers a basis for understanding my use of curative recalibration. As with Douglass' analysis of the Constitution, the recalibration process takes language, in my case biblical, seemingly meant to harm and finds a norm that pushes for human freedom and dignity. Using this

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\(^{50}\) Foner, The Life and Writings of Frederick Douglass, 75.

example from Douglass, my goal was to illustrate the style of approaching any text, including the Bible, and resulting transformative activity among antebellum blacks. We move now to examples of the way this style of curative recalibration activity is revealed through Christo-religious ideology and thought.

*Case Study #2 – Recalibrating the Black Religious Body: Daniel Alexander Payne*

Churchman Daniel Alexander Payne was a prominent voice from among the African American populous on issues of institutional Christianity and praxis. He labored to create space for blacks during slavery on at least two fronts: political (external) and communal (internal). Politically he applied pressure to the United States leadership class regarding the moral and dilemma of a “Christian government” sanctioning slavery. Part of this effort is seen in his pressing of Abraham Lincoln in 1862, shortly after Congress passed a bill to abolish slavery in Washington D.C., to sign the bill with haste. On the internal/communal level he strategically taught of desired attributes among antebellum blacks, urging personal morality, education, and stable black families. Thusly focusing of dual, often opposing, social poles Payne attempted to secure the best space for blacks of that day, one of wholeness and fully acknowledged worth in society. As a backdrop to general antebellum black religious thought surrounding the Divine, Payne sets for an example of curative recalibration as culturally engaged activity.

Payne’s efforts to bring about change in the cultural language about blackness led him to extract from hegemonic uses of Scripture, principles that would secure a better social position for blacks. Part of this process, as theologian Kelly Brown Douglas reveals (partly discussed in chapter two), meant that enslaved blacks sought, by way of
their own efforts, to reconfigure their bodies as sacred, thereby making them “acceptable” to whites. In other words, bringing this socially despised black body into submission was considered a tactical effort to reveal the “beauty” of the Christian bodies, making them worthy to be considered among the human family. The recalibration tactic employed here is clear, if the “flesh,” especially black flesh, is intrinsically evil and debased, then blacks must recalibrate the very Scriptures used to uphold thoughts of the putridity to show, through Scripture, the possibility of their beauty. Such a line of thought leads Douglas to conclude that Christianity allowed antebellum blacks

\[N\]ot simply to survive but perhaps most importantly to affirm their sacred humanity, even as hat humanity was being viciously defiled. In this regard, black men and women accepted Christianity only inasmuch as it too, both ritualistically and theologically, was consonant with their theocultural heritage and thus affirmed the sanctity of their very humanity…[I]t affirmed the sacral value of the body with its stress on the importance of the conversion experience, and it affirmed the sacredness of black humanity through its practical regard for “spiritual equality.”

This bodily recalibration covered all grounds influenced by social ideas about blackness, whether aesthetic, moral, spiritual, ethical, or cultural. Therefore, it becomes the substance of Payne’s position that strategically, antebellum blacks had to show themselves worthy to full acknowledgment.

I am reading Payne’s pronouncements on this issue as a tactic of recalibration in an effort to redeploy a machine bent on black destruction. By navigating both the political and internal/communal spheres, Payne sought to recast the function of a cultural and religious machine whose principal aim was to maintain a certain form of social order, producing people, as Kameron Carter asserts, of a particular, might I add humanly truncated, sort. In welcoming the recently “ransomed captives” from slavery in the

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District of Columbia, Payne thus expresses that having reached this new point in life, through noble character they “will be morally prepared to recognize and respond to all the relations of civilized and Christianized life." In celebration of this great “redemption” Payne reminded them that moral virtues would solidify the black community and present them more acceptable. Imploring them not to “lounge in sinful indolence” or “degrade” themselves “by vice” was therefore tactical and meant to recalibrate a new perspective about the black human body, individually (physically) and communally (socially). Formulated in this manner, Christianity functioned in very particular ways for the benefit of blacks. Even if it had been used as a tool to maintain slavery, turned thusly on its head, forcing black bodies to constrain themselves by way of Christian virtues expressly created space, as considered by Payne, for wholeness and ultimate equality. This form of religious recalibration is but one major expression of the function of black Christianity. Applying the hermeneutic of reclamation also calls for a recalibration of the Divine. In so doing, blacks sought to express some form of power in the face of authority.

Case Study #3 – Religious Recalibration: Conceptions of God in Coker’s “Dialogue”

In this analysis I have implicitly paid attention to the religious climate during the antebellum period with respect to the issue and utility of God and the master-slave relationship. That is, how one conceives the divine is expressly connected to lived experience and the way they both navigate and respond to socio-political stimuli. Such

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conceptions and connected action become the proving ground for curative recalibration. The process of conceiving the divine in suitable ways is itself a curative recalibrational act in that this process entails a push against the status quo toward a concept of the divine that establishes blacks as whole people. By way of this position, I turn to ex-slave Daniel Coker’s *A Dialogue Between A Virginian and An African Minister*.

I believe this account, though fictional, expresses an important idea about recalibrational spirituality. I am inclined as well to argue that it too functions as an extended slave narrative in written qua fictional form. By this I mean that because it expressly exhibits Coker’s thoughts and reflections on the Bible, religion, and slavery during the antebellum period, it gives the reader a sense of his own formative thought on these serious issues. This work reveals the very nature of a dual and dueling construal of God in a society where bio-political existence is of primary concern for both parties. Coker’s work does a great deal to reveal two important things about black religion during the antebellum period: through this account he (1) shows the potential that may come in the form of a changed posture in response to the absurdity of dire maltreatment. Further, by writing and publishing this work in the first place Coker (2) brings an element of recalibrational spirituality *as lived* into focus. That is to say, the constructing of this fictional work, especially given its content, reveals curative recalibration in that it is used to change the enemy’s misuse of language and has the potential to expressly change the posture and mind of the reader of the text and the author himself. Accordingly, I see this work both as fictional tool and factual historical happening with regard to its unique expression of a “whole” black life during antebellum slavery.
Born in 1780 to a black mother and white father, Coker was freed from bondage in Maryland and became one of the most renowned ministers of his day. Ordained a deacon in the Methodist church around, Coker was a major contributor when the African Methodists broke free from white control in 1816. Coker, initially offered the bishop’s position, declined (with Richard Allen assuming the post) and eventually left for the West African coast of Sierra Leone.

Published in 1810, Coker’s Dialogue is one of a few pamphlets formally protesting the institution of chattel slavery in the antebellum South. Though a fictional account bordering the hyperbolic, this pamphlet could also be considered, at least in part, non-fictional or even autobiographical. These multiple functions exist because it offers an intellectual account of Coker’s personal views regarding chattel slavery in North America, slaveholders specifically, general issues of race and racism, and the way in which God factors in all of these issues. Coker thus walks a fine line between projecting his (and other African Americans’) views into the mainstream and completely offending white readers. Underscoring this fact is the reality that Coker’s work functioned in multifaceted ways as a critical assessment of the state of affairs of the day for two Christian communities—white and black, enslaver and slave—both including adherents acknowledging belief in a benevolent and omnipotent God.

Not to be considered one of chance happening, the Dialogue’s setting is that of an encounter between a black minister and a Virginian slaveholder. The Dialogue itself puts forth a multifaceted message. First, it clearly condemns the slavemasters for forbidding their slaves religious instruction. Additionally, it advances a thought provoking argument for the emancipation of the enslaved. Marked by a high level of politeness, the story

itself is narrated by Coker’s alter ego, the African minister. At times both sides even graciously implore the other to relay arguments of which they are diametrically opposed. The Virginian initially sets out to confront the minister for his “strange opinions” regarding slavery. The dialogue swiftly moves through the various biblical justifications lobbied from both sides for and against slavery as an institution. The dialogue culminates with the minister, albeit fantastically, persuading the Virginian to manumit his slaves. As we will see, this banter frames for our purposes a dual view of God for those with the power to enslave and those enslaved.

Within this Dialogue we find that early on in the conversation the Virginian makes clear his position on the merits of religion and, more importantly, insights to his thoughts regarding chattel slavery as he responds to the initial greeting from the African minister

Sir, your civility gives me much pleasure, and I am already convinced of the good that results from religion, and literary improvements; and I flatter myself that my visit will be somewhat advantageous to me. But...I will hasten to inform you that I have been told you have imbibed a strange opinion [regarding slavery], which, I think is repugnant to reason and justice.\(^{55}\)

Without mentioning the implications underlying the Virginian’s shock regarding the African Minister’s civility, what becomes clear at the outset is that the Virginian seeks to advance a corrective to the African minister regarding the institution of slavery. At this point the reader finds the African Minister gracious but not beguiled by the Virginian’s kindness and gentlemanly approach.

Further advancing his position, the Virginian discloses his aim to convince the African Minister that any position against slavery would in his mind be “wrong in the

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highest degree.” Thereupon, the African Minister, responding to the Virginian’s dual justification of slavery (biblical and legal), offers the first clear objection to slavery on legal grounds stating that “it is against the law of humanity, common sense, reason and conscience”\textsuperscript{56} to hold any human being in slavery. The position the African Minister posits here sets the tone for their discussion on biblical grounds. The reality within the plantation church setting was that few planters were concerned with the earthly lot of the enslaved, at least with respect to full human freedoms. Accordingly, slavery was accepted as a necessary mode of southern life and was even defended as a positive good, sanctioned by Scripture and capable of producing a Christian social order of duty, slave to master and master to slave. It was the ideal of the antebellum plantation mission to create such a rule of gospel order by convincing slaves and masters that their salvation depended on it.\textsuperscript{57} With the underpinning set, the plantation church takes form as a paradoxical exchange between to separate communities serving the same God.

Eventually, the slaves demonstrated a general unwillingness to settle for form without substance in spiritual matters.\textsuperscript{58} In this regard Coker’s \textit{Dialogue} is again informative. In the course of his biblical argument the African Minister offers the Virginian slaveholder a counter biblical interpretation. Responding to the Virginian’s scriptural inquiry regarding Abraham’s holding of slaves as a basis for a biblical justification for North American chattel slavery, the African Minister gently retorts,

\begin{quote}
Well sir, the scripture to which I think you refer, reads thus, “He that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised.” &c. Gen. xvii. 13. Now, I suppose your minister undertook
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Mohr, “Slaves in White Churches”, 155.
to infer from this, that Abraham had slaves, and as he bought them with money, therefore to make slaves of the Africans must be right.\textsuperscript{59}

At this rejoinder and setting the tone for a need of recalibration, the Virginian affirms that this line of scripture is consistent with his (white) minister’s teaching. But to drive the point further the Virginian responds that if slavery was “immoral itself, a just God would never have given it the sanction of his authority; and if lawful in itself... we may safely follow the example of faithful Abraham, or act according to the law of Moses.”\textsuperscript{60} To be sure, this sentiment gets us to the heart of the matter for the Virginian. This is to say, the Virginian sees a Godly justification for slavery whether or not moral or lawful. In short, because of God’s sanction, slavery was simply, right.

In an unflappable fashion, the African Minister seamlessly weaves a potent counter argument highlighting with great detail that those circumcised who were purchased were indeed entitled to the benefits that accompanied circumcision. Hence, the argument was turned in a way that allowed for a conclusion to be made that even a slave, if biblically justifiable, could receive all the benefits of their master. Recasting the argument in this light the Minister confers that “The children then were the servants of the Lord, in the same sense as the natural descendents of Abraham were; and therefore, according to the law, they could not be made slaves.”\textsuperscript{61}

Striking in this depiction of the African Minister’s resolve is the bold manner with which he dealt with the subject. To be sure, his faith in God, the same God no doubt as the Virginian, was unchanged, without regard to the proslavery arguments waged against him. However, simply holding steadfastly to one’s faith in the face of the absurd is but

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 20.
one, rather common, element of black Christian faith. What makes this case unique is the grounding of this undying faith. That is, the African Minister was able to make affirmative claims about God according to sound interpretation and biblical substantiation. While I appreciate the fictional nature of this exchange, I believe that it does offer general insights as to the function of God in the lives of antebellum slaves. In a further declarative statement the Minister states that

It is very evident, that slavery is contrary to the spirit and nature of the Christian religion. It is contrary to that most excellent precept, laid down by the Divine Author of the Christian establishment, viz. “Whatever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them; for this is the law and the prophets.” MATT. VII. 12. 62

Clearly (and justifiably) convinced of God’s benevolence and justice with regard to the poor and oppressed, the African Minister fancifully compels the Virginian to make but one decision: to free his slaves.

This account exhibits the nature of the exchange between slave and master, or at least the possibilities of such an exchange. The African Minister clearly takes the upper hand in responding to each biblical and legal justification for slavery offered by the Virginian. The Minister’s culminating position that, when all is said and done, God’s retribution on behalf of his “suffering brother’s experience” shall be severely and violently punished, 63 the slave’s position of who God is and how God functions for oppressed blacks becomes clear. Conversely, the very same God, even once “convinced” that slavery was unjust, functions for whites in a way that still secures for them a prominent position between the races. After a lengthy dialogue, the same God seems to remain different between blacks and whites.

62 Ibid., 25.
63 See Ibid., 35
Case Study #4 – Religious Recalibration: Cultural Conceptions of God in Narratives

Religious reflection among antebellum slaves, former slaves, and free blacks also reflect features of curative recalibration vis-à-vis a formative concept of God. Antebellum slave narratives (pondering their lot in life) offer clear and radical questioning of the state of affairs of the day.⁶⁴ These declarative statements, properly interpreted, divulge a curative sentiment determined to change (recalibrate and thus reclaim) oppressive structures while creating a space for full manumission and personhood (producing a cure).

The experience of John Thompson, a slave from Maryland during the antebellum period illustrates this point that the oppressor’s religion indeed needed changing:

...[T]he Methodist religion was brought among us, and preached in a manner so plain that the way faring men, though a fool, could not err therein. This new doctrine produced a great consternation among slave holders.... It brought glad tidings to the poor bondmen; it bound up the broken-hearted; it opened the prison doors to them that were bound, and let the captive go free. As soon as it got among the slaves, it spread from plantation to plantation, until it reached ours, where there were but few who did not experience religion.⁶⁵

Thompson’s statements reveal certain underpinnings to a curative recalibration religious expression. Consider, for example, his designation of fellow slaves as “fools.” This designation clearly distinguishes the powerless from the powerful. That is, it uncovers the completely oppressive system wherein he found himself and his brethren. What is most impressive is the way religion granted freedom to the slave in spite of his or her social position. The slaves therefore “experienced” religion through this recalibration of

⁶⁴ I will ultimately like to investigate the ways in which certain contemporary strands of rap music, which ponder the residue of slavery, express this declarative language.
slaveholding religion and acted curatively in that it allowed the slaves to see themselves as liberated and encouraged them to act accordingly while creating for them a new posture in the face of suffering.

Also consistent with this line of thought one former slave recalls that she trusts God even through suffering "...because He sees and knows all things. And because I trust in God, He leads me into all wisdom and shows me the failings of hypocrites and liars."⁶⁶ Consider also former North Carolina slave James Curry’s thoughts on this subject. Reflecting on his clandestine Bible readings on the Sabbath: “I learned that it was contrary to the revealed will of God, that one man should hold another as a slave.... [I]n the Bible I learned that ‘God hath made of one blood all the nations of men to dwell on all the face of the earth.”⁶⁷ Accordingly, in whatever way one considers the merits of the plantation church arrangement as beneficial for the black enslaved, one thing seems certain: the slaves’ concept of God functioned in a way to counter the slaveholders’ God concept for the purpose of engendering hope to stand through adversity and, of further significance, empowering them to actively challenge their subjugated positions.

Oppositional religious practices for the enslaved surfaced within the antebellum plantation church. Christianity itself represented a contradictory faith for African Americans; its signs, symbols, words, and messages were used to physically and mentally enslave.⁶⁸ Certainly, plantation churches for black chattel hinged on the segregation of the races as a cardinal principle of the plantation owners’ Christianity and white (paid)

clergy’s theology and dictum. The slavemasters’ theology appeared to harbor the assumption that since God created humanity dissimilar and unequal, therefore, the house in which the divinity was worshiped necessitated a demarcated order of difference.69 As a result, faith in God, infused with a strong sense of interrelatedness, community, and balance suggests that an “epistemology of self” (that is, awareness of one’s consciousness) anchored the enslaved religious experience within plantation churches.

Within this arrangement the slaves’ manipulated God functions particularly as a projection of the enslaved not only as a perfected people free of finite warts but also as an empowered force potent and poised for radical engagement with racist Christianity. Given the peculiarity of this stance vis-à-vis their enslaved social position, a unique feature is present in their perspective of God. Black antebellum evocation of God was, for all intensive purposes, a “calling up” or literally a “conjuring” of God.

The conjured God emboldened the with a sense of liberated humanity as they engaged in recalibrating action. Former slave William Hayden is again an exemplar of this line of thought offering the bold claim in the face of white oppression that “God gave me the means and the light, and by these I claim to be your equal.”70 Even in cases where slaves were lucky enough the experience manumission, the concept of a God of justice bolstered their confidence to secure freedom for other slaves. Reflecting on his introduction to God and ultimate recalibration of his God concept, former slave James Pennington exclaims of slavery that he

“saw it [slavery] now as an evil under the moral government of God—as a sin not only against man, but also against God. The great and engrossing

69 Hopkins, Down, Up, and Over, 89.
thought with me was, how shall I now employ my time and my talents so as to tell most effectually upon this system of wrong!"\textsuperscript{71}

This change in posture in the face of the dire consequences of slavery foreshadow the fundamental make up of curative recalibration. As a firsthand task, Pennington implicitly considered the waste of the limited God he had received from and Elder in the Presbyterian Church, a God that simply seeks reconciliation from sin. Expressing that his was a labor that encompassed "deep reflection" on God in light of human bondage, he sought to show that the hand of God was indeed with the slave. In this posture he declared to the slaveholding community that, short of repentance, "the judgment of Almighty God" would be brought down "upon their devoted heads."\textsuperscript{72} Such a move bespeaks a bold declaration about the God for antebellum blacks. According the Pennington, blacks "have the glorious and total weight of God's moral character" in their side of the scale.

The idea of curative recalibration as representative of a primary function within black religion identifies what I consider attributes of the cure. In this case, a counter-conception of the Divine creates constructive space for the "cured" re-construal of the black self and thus a re-conception of their inhabited world. While I cast these elements in terms of a response to social and political stimuli, it is important to keep in mind that response is but one significant element involved in curative recalibration. In short, as previously alluded to, recalibrational spirituality is also proactive in its engagement with life as well. It not only responds but also continually creates space for self-definition as


\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 582.
natural and perpetual course of action. But a stark reality remains, signification in the
driven by racist ideology requires reactive action to reclassify the self and identity.

Recalibration becomes the primary activity through which the cure of the black
self (flesh) and identity is produced. Thus, the sign of the cure or, shall we say, of the
whole self, is revealed in a myriad of forms—bodily, socially, politically, or otherwise.
One of the most poignant ways this wholeness is seen is through the free, if politically
and culturally dangerous, use of (counter hegemonic) language. The changing of
language is itself curative (as process) and exposes the cure (as lived activity).
Antebellum black language of cultural-religious critique also gives us a view of curative
recalibration of this sort. Again, within the context of the counter-conception of God, the
"cured" black embodied being expresses a recalibrated conception of the Divine, which
in turn recalibrates selfhood. It is in this light that the incorrigible runaway slave Henry
Bibb makes a recalibrated declaration about God in 1852. Unable to reconcile any form
of a “Divine justification” for slavery by Christians holding others in bondage, Bibb
retorts to one of his former owners,

"Now, Sir, allow me with the greatest deference to your intelligence to
inform you that you are miserably deceiving yourself, if you believe that
you are in the straight and narrow path to heaven, whilst you are practicing
such abominable violations of the plainest precepts of religion....and
whilst you continue in such an unhallowed course of conduct, your
prayers, your solemn fasts and ordinances are an abomination to the Lord,
from which he will turn his face away, in disgust, and will not hear or look
upon."\(^{73}\)

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Bibb offers the basis of recalibrational thought through his exhibiting of wholeness (cure) through declarative language. At its core, this language is rooted in maltreated social and physical existence.

Toward the establishment of concept the God suitable for black utilization called for slaves like Bibb to definitively critique and declare that slaveholding Christian practice as religiously “vain” and “base” in its hypocrisy. In recalibrating a “black” conception of the God and God’s actions the sufferer takes the machinery of anti-black religious language and ideology and sets (recalibrates) the machine for a new, fuller use. Again in a letter to his former master Bibb critiques the machinery functioning destructively for Africans and declares that “the voice of God has ever been to break every yoke and the let the oppressed go free.” Thus, he inquires, “how can man with all of the instincts of his own soul arrayed against slavery resist the appeal?”

What results is an alternate construal of the Divine. Bibb thus resolves

I could see that the All-wise Creator, had made man a free, moral, intelligent and accountable being; capable of knowing good and evil. And I believed then, as I believe now, that every man has a right to wages of his labor... a right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness; and a right to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience. But here, in the light of these truths, I was a slave, a prisoner for life.

This status of prisoner is overwhelmed by the recalibrational desire at the core of this form of black cultural and religious interaction. This recalibrational desire forced former slave Henry Brown to conclude with respect to his belief in hell that “knowing the slaveholders and slavery, it is my settled belief, as it was when I was a slave, even though I was treated kindly, that every slaveholder will infallibly go to that hell, unless he

74 Ibid., 56.
repents.” 76 These expressions, not unlike a host of others among the antebellum enslaved community, represents curative recalibration in its turning slaveholding religion on its head, equating it with what is most evil and vile in the world, while simultaneously conveying a God who seeks all that slaveholders sought, through the same God, to deny blacks. Audacious in content, such declarative statements also point the hearer or recipient of these sentiments to a recalibrated black self as well. This personal recalibration, curative in its ability to fortify black identity toward wholeness, encouraged even the most hyperbolic of ideas and statements.

In spite of a lack of empirical evidence to the contrary, many slaves recalibrated harmful religious language and offered expressions that they themselves acknowledged as possibly fanciful. Take former slave William Hayden’s words for instance.

Convinced of God’s anti-slavery position, Hayden admits that “to some it may seem as a wild and unfeasible theory—void of common sense...but it is true, and unchangeable, that God exists in His might and power, and will one day come to judge the world in righteousness and justice.” 77 Removing the emphasis or aim of God’s judgment from the idea of personal salvation or piety, Hayden points to sin in relation to evil as perpetrated on enslaved blacks as the foremost behavior which God will root out.

What is ultimately convincing to those expressing curative recalibration is, as Hayden expresses, that “God works his wonders, not in one man—nor any particular set of men—but in ALL, unobservant of clime and color.” What remains most instructive about the nature and impact of religion on the oppressed as the extent to which this


refashioning of religious language is deployed from within the very social and political climate that seeks to maintain the second-class status of blacks. Assessing all that his slave experience afforded him, Hayden resigned that "God gave me means and the light, and by these I claim to be your equal." A claim of such magnitude, that is, when we account for his lived experience, bridges that gap between the adverse effects of external oppression and the establishment of transformed black identity. In so doing, its recalibrational nature fully acknowledges maltreatment as reality in lived experience but uses the same power that affirms the authority of the oppressor for restorative use.

With traditional understandings of God (as presented by slavemasters) bracketed, slaves transformed God not in general make-up but rather in functional emphasis with the ultimate goal of empowerment in the face of oppression. As Paul Radin writes in the forward to God Struck Me Dead: "the Negro was not converted to God. He converted God to himself." Through this process, the slaves' God was restored divine attributes, confiscating divine power of the earthly master. This process moves further by empowering the enslaved to stand against oppression by making declarative statements of who God was for them. As former slave William Craft reveals, many slaves were convinced of God's ultimate role in the manumission of God's suffering people: "It is not for me to say what will become of those heartless tyrants. I must leave them in the hands of an all-wise and just God, who will, in his own good time, and in his own way, avenge the wrongs of his oppressed people." In this way, God was recalibrated, engendering a

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unique sense of hope against the absurdity of their hopelessness. The residue of hope and faith was curative and formed a new idea of self for those broken by maltreatment.

But this analysis also asks where recalibration efforts can be found in published works of protest and cultural critiques during the antebellum period. David Walker’s Appeal was indeed important in establishing a religious counter-language about God, while also pushing to secure a black counter-hegemonic cultural language fortifying the sensibilities of curative recalibration. Accordingly, I move now to unpack the Appeal with these ideas in mind.

Case Study #5 – Religio-Socio-Political & Ideological Recalibration: Walker’s Appeal

David Walker, a free black in Boston, offers a stormy indictment against slavery on religious grounds. In his 1829 Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, Walker exclaims “Though our cruel oppressors and murderers, may (if possible) treat us more cruel, as Pharaoh did the Children of Israel, yet the God of the Ethiopians, has been pleased to hear our moans in consequence of oppression, and the day of our redemption from abject wretchedness draweth near.”\textsuperscript{81} God is here named, targeted, or invoked as “the God of the Ethiopians,” we may best designate this rhetorical device as a literary form of God-conjuring.\textsuperscript{82} Paramount in Walker’s statement, then, is the identification of blacks as the people of God. Equally important are the African undertones. This God specifically sides with those who are descendents of the continent.

\textsuperscript{81} David Walker, David Walker’s Appeal, To the Coloured Citizens of the World, ed. Peter P. Hinks (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002).
Accordingly, the slaves' intent within such a declaration was both mimetic and incantatory, so that whatever happens to the name (God) also happens to the target group.\textsuperscript{83} For the oppressed black the desired intent was to struggle to produce a \textit{new and improved} identity by manipulating or fashioning a God that was useful for their experiences. The intention of Walker's (as well as other enslaved blacks) literary-religious expression was thus to induce material transformations of reality for enslaved people in America.\textsuperscript{84} This material transformation would in turn produce a slave/God connection potent to perpetually respond to oppressive power of counter-hegemonic power. This connection between slave and the Divine forms the backdrop to Walker's curative recalibrational sentiments and style in cultural-political critique in general.

As a prominent example of social critique during the antebellum period, David Walker's \textit{Appeal} reveals this curative recalibration sentiment most effectively through several affirming declarative statements. Though a written text it functions within the declarative oral and even the black preaching tradition for the purpose of impacting lives for a certain end. As we have seen, his goal is to attack the wretched plight of blacks and to awaken his slumbering and afflicted brethren to take affirmative action against oppression with full manumission in mind as the final manifestation of this activity. From such an endeavor arises recalibration activity. In this sense, full liberation is the norm that governs a perpetual push for fullness even if it never actually materializes. Taken aggregately, then, the \textit{Appeal} itself is a tool of curative recalibration. At a first level it exhibits performative activity that reflects a religious intent and impact on the reader/hearer.

\textsuperscript{83} See Smith, \textit{Conjuring Culture}, 147.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid.
At the outset of his recalibration of the great machine—in the form of a critique and radical questioning of slaveholding Christianity—Walker pinpoints the flaw in its current function. We can extract this sentiment when he states that “...pure and undefiled religion, such as was preached by Jesus Christ and his apostles, is hard to be found in all the earth.”\textsuperscript{85} Considering the principle function and impact of slaveholding Christianity on the oppressed we can see how those in power would hold that the “machine” was functioning “properly.” Regarding the European use and dispensation of Christianity Walker continues, “[T]he Europeans...in open violation of [Christianity] have made merchandise of us, and it does appear as though they take this very dispensation to aid them in their infernal depredations upon us.”\textsuperscript{86} Elsewhere he states that “…Christian Americans, not only hinder their fellow creatures, the Africans, but thousands of them will absolutely beat a coloured person nearly to death, if they catch him on his knees, supplicating the throne of grace.”\textsuperscript{87} Therefore, recalibration activity by Walker takes on the task of reformulating this subversive use of the machine for the benefit of his afflicted brethren. Again, though radical questioning is involved, this process does not encompass a complete changing of the machine. Rather, he intends on utilizing the machine (Christianity) for the benefit and empowerment of the afflicted.

Exhibiting the curative affects of this recalibration activity Walker makes certain life affirming claims. With respect to the reestablished self and the fruits of black labor versus “recalibrative” striving, Walker declares:

Understand me, brethren, I do not mean to speak against the occupations by which we acquire enough and sometimes scarcely that, to render

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 39.
ourselves and families comfortable through life. I am subjected to the same inconvenience, as you all. -- My objections are, to our glorying and being happy in such low employments; for if we are men, we ought to be thankful to the Lord for the past, and for the future, Be looking forward with thankful hearts to higher attainments than wielding the razor and cleaning boots and shoes. The man whose aspirations are not above, and even below these, is indeed, ignorant and wretched enough.... [Y]our full glory and happiness, as well as all other coloured people under Heaven, shall never be fully consummated, but with the entire emancipation of your enslaved brethren all over the world.... *For I believe it is the will of the Lord that our greatest happiness shall consist in working for the salvation of our whole body.* When this is accomplished a burst of glory will shine upon you, which will indeed astonish you and the world.\(^{88}\)

I seize upon two words Walker utters within this excerpt: “salvation” and “body.”

*Salvation* as used here, I argue, deals with the curative repositioning of the black oppressed. It is the result of recalibrative activity. Working with what is given, Walker assigns salvation to the happiness associated with labor, even if menial, that encourages one to see themselves as fully emancipated. The result, accordingly, is happiness even if great fruits of this labor are not realized. The *body*, then, is understood as the oppressed individual (or collective) who benefits from this curative activity.

Walker makes final declaration that, “We are a people, notwithstanding many of you doubt it. You have the Bible in your hands, with this very injunction....O Americans!...your destruction is at hand, and will be speedily consummated unless you repent.”\(^{89}\) This final declarative move reveals the full illumination of curative recalibration on Walker himself. Though it functions restoratively for all the oppressed, he becomes an intimate partner in this restoration. This fact is shown through his defiance of American enslavers, appealing even to them to repent of their oppressive acts.

To recapitulate: within our interaction with Walker’s *Appeal* we observed first a radical

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questioning of the oppressive structures of slaveholding and slaveholding Christianity. Secondly, we identified the process of recalibrating slaveholding Christianity in particular and the slave system (America) in general so that both—Christianity as a transformative religion and America on social and political grounds—function curatively in their recalibrated forms. By way of further illustration, Walker’s Appeal may too reveal a particular aggregate “act” of curative recalibration. Accordingly, I posit that the Appeal should be perceived as Walker’s recalibrative act of offering a counter-Constitutional document. That is, the Appeal recalibrates the U.S. Constitution for transformative use by enslaved Africans.

We have elsewhere considered the way in which the Constitution has been interpreted as both a pro and anti slavery document. In the case of Frederick Douglass I offered his interpretive shift on the Constitution as a general example of curative recalibration, wherein the same language used to harm was recalibrated and used to make the harmed whole. It is important to note that Constitutional faith and loyalty, notably among Americans during the antebellum period, was tantamount to religious adherence and faith in the Bible. I now move to a more specifically ‘religious’ assessment of Constitution and an example of the way it was recalibrated in the form of a juxtaposing document: Walker’s Appeal. My final inspection of the Appeal will be carried out on the grounds of viewing it from the purview of the Constitution. I will briefly consider whether or not the Appeal was indeed intended as a “constitutional” (counter-Constitution) document for blacks. My contention is that Walker intended for African Americans during and after the antebellum period, at the very least, to religiously subscribe to its tenets and imperatives in ways similar to adherence to the Constitution.
That David Walker had an indelible effect on the antislavery abolitionist movement during the antebellum period is unmistakable. Born a free black in Wilmington, North Carolina, between 1796 and 1797, Walker was well aware of the atrocities of slavery. Spending his formative years in the South he would migrate North at an early age. However, before making this move, somewhere between 1815 and 1820, David Walker chose to leave Wilmington and make the short journey south to Charleston, South Carolina.91

Such migrations were frequent among free blacks in the Carolinas in the antebellum south because Charleston boasted one of the largest free black populations in the south. While there, Walker was exposed to Denmark Vesey, a relatively prominent free black in Charleston and the mastermind behind a grand but foiled slave insurrection. Although no conclusive records exist that Walker was involved in the planning of that insurrection, he most certainly witnessed the fallout once the plan was uncovered. That fallout included a multitude of public executions, including Vesey’s. Soon after, Walker made his way North landing in Boston, where he made his home, became a used clothing merchant, and got involved with the local abolitionist movements. His memories of the South would deeply color the work for which he is best remembered, the Appeal, one of antebellum America’s most powerful political documents.92

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90 Several debates exist regarding Walker’s actual date of birth. Henry Highland Garnet reports that Walker was born on September 28, 1785 in Walker’s Appeal, With a Brief Sketch of His Life. However, this date is widely seen as problematic given that, first, census records do not identify Walker’s existence that early and, secondly, Garnet identifies Walker’s death age as 34. Historians have generally excepted this age a pretty close to his accurate age of death. Therefore, given that the death records in Boston lists his death in 1830 at the age of 33, 1785 seems far too early to be considered a plausible date of birth.


92 Ibid., xiii.
The objective of the *Appeal* was in part to instill pride and hope in its black readers. It vehemently attacked the institution of slavery, revealing the moral problem that existed with America being slave-holding nation while at the same time professing certain Christian sensibilities. It also spoke out against colonization, a popular movement that sought to move free blacks to a colony in Africa. America, Walker believed, belonged to all who helped build it. The result was an impactful document with the power to mobilize an entire race of people to action against slavery. Walker boldly chastises the United States and the foundations of its political ideology, stating

See your Declaration Americans! ! ! Do you understand your own language? Hear your languages, proclaimed to the world, July 4th, 1776 -- "We hold these truths to be self evident -- that ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL! ! that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness! !" Compare your own language above, extracted from your Declaration of Independence, with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us -- men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation! ! ! ! !

Such a line of thought offer Walker the basis and fodder for a counter to the misuse of the U.S. Constitution with regard to black citizens of the United States. As we will observe, certain identifiable qualities exist between the structure and goal of the *Appeal* vis-à-vis the Constitution. With the aforementioned informing our analysis of the *Appeal*, we now construct possible links to the Constitution on two fronts: structure and textual religio-social impact.

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The Appeal as "Constitutional" on the grounds of structure. Walker, it seems, had two important structural goals in mind with his Appeal: (1) a construction similar to the Constitution and, (2) a similar literary construction with respect to a desire for longstanding impact. Aesthetically and structurally, Walker used Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence and the Constitution as the structural model for his pamphlet (his Appeal is in the form of "Articles"), citing the words of the Declaration as the model and rallying call for black freedom.\[^{94}\]

Walker further sets the tone for his Appeal in a preamble, wherein he expresses the need for such a document. "We the people" ordains and establishes the Constitution as the proverbial "law of the land." Walker, too, uses his preamble as a tool to establish his text. He further uses it to engage the "suburbs" of the issues within the Appeal before going "more fully into the interior of this system of cruelty and oppression."\[^{95}\] In both cases, the preamble is a prominent feature that launches an important document. Therefore, given these aesthetic similarities, it can be logically held that Walker desired that the Appeal become commonplace in American discourse regarding matters of freedom and liberty.

A paramount factor to take into account regarding the significance of these documents is to consider their merits as literature. This consideration may be seen as a trite or unimportant starting point but I would argue the opposite. That is, especially when one considers the fact that the Appeal was written during a time when most blacks, especially in the South, were illiterate, black literature on this scale was an anomaly.


Black authors, especially during the antebellum period, accepted the premise that a group, a "race," had to demonstrate its equality through the creation of literature.\textsuperscript{96} Walker, therefore, before anything else knew that in order for the black race to be accounted for, literature of the greatest quality had to be constructed and circulated amongst the black masses. Thereafter, he knew that this literature must also be appreciated, adhered to, and have the ability to withstand heavy critique. As he saw it, documents such as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, with all their faults, were of the sustainable quality he desired for his \textit{Appeal}.

Again, it was not enough to create the \textit{Appeal} if it would not have a transcending impact on American culture and thought. More importantly, it would fail to mobilize his beloved black brethren if it were weak literature. With all of the inherent challenges of distributing his \textit{Appeal} (of course, southern slaveholders felt it was inflammatory and had the potential to insight insurrection), it obviously had some impact on his desired audience. Throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, the leaders of black America all made clear that they not only endorsed David Walker and his work but also considered him one of the great inspirational leaders for African Americans.\textsuperscript{97} In fact, Frederick Douglass gave Walker credit for being a central influence on his life.

In 1883, Douglass was remembering Walker as an inspirational pioneer in the defense of black freedom and rights whose labors preceded even those of Garrison:

The question is sometimes asked, when, where and by whom the Negro was first suspected of having any rights at all? In answer to this inquiry it has been asserted that William Lloyd Garrison originated the Anti-slavery movement...I love and venerate the memory of William Lloyd

\textsuperscript{96} Gates, \textit{The Trials of Phillis Wheatley}, 65.
\textsuperscript{97} Hinks, \textit{To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren}, 113.
Garrison...[Yet I]t is no disparagement to him to affirm that he was preceded by many other good men whom it would be a pleasure to remember on occasions like this. Walker, a colored man, whose appeal against slavery startled the land like a trump of coming judgment, was before Mr. Garrison....

What we see here is the obvious fact that as a matter of impactful literature, like the Constitution before it, the Appeal structurally stood the test of time. Walker and his work became a point of reference and regular language among later freedom fighters. Even as late as 1940, W.E.B. Du Bois lauded the Appeal as "that tremendous indictment of slavery" that represented the first "program of organized opposition to the action and attitude of the dominant white group [and included] ceaseless agitation and insistent demand for equality." Placing aside the merits of Du Bois' critique, again, we can readily observe the impact of the Appeal, like the Constitution, as a literary device for the ages.

The Appeal as "Constitutional" on the grounds of textual religio-social impact. Douglass felt that the Constitution, by definition, did not abrogate that which it was ordained to establish, namely, liberty, justice and the general good. These ends involved the protection of the common rights of all citizens, rights that Douglass identified as the God-given, common rights of all humanity. For Douglass, the emphasis on God-given liberties superceded even civil law. For him, abolition of slavery became Christian praxis of the highest order. So, the "Christianity of Christ," as he often referred to as correctly practiced biblical Christianity, had the power to fill in the gaps where the Constitution

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100 Williamson, The Narrative Life, 123.
fell short. Through this lens, the Constitution could not authorize slavery even if the framers intended it to do so.¹⁰¹

David Walker's approach to the Appeal seems to be driven by a similar sentiment. That is, Walker makes clear that, according to the laws of the land, there was no excuse for slavery. For him, white America, given the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, could by no means consider slavery just, moral, or right. Moreover, he labored to get blacks to understand that, given the imperatives of these "sacred" documents, their enslavement was not just and they were in a justifiable position to endeavor to secure liberty. Religion was thence used in the Appeal, as with Douglass, to fill in the civil and social gaps. Christianity raised the moral clarion call for America to live up to the principles set forth in the Constitution.

Setting up this line of reasoning, Walker, in the Appeal, states that, "pure and undefiled religion, such as was preached by Jesus Christ and his apostles, is hard to be found in all the earth."¹⁰² At the core of Walker's moral and religious position against America's promotion of slavery was his chastisement of white preachers whom he felt should have been the primary purveyors of Constitutional liberty. He writes, "Have not the Americans the Bible in their hands? Do they believe it?...See how they treat us in open violation of the Bible!!"¹⁰³ Walker is miffed at the fact that American Christians could stand for freedom and liberty and freely oppress with the Bible in hand. He continues, "...an American minister, with the Bible in his hand, holds us and our children

¹⁰¹ Ibid.
¹⁰³ Ibid., 40.
in the most abject slavery and wretchedness."\textsuperscript{104} Hence, there was little hope for the black Christian in view of white American Christianity. In response, Walker warns America to live according to her claims of liberty for all exclaiming, "I tell you Americans! that unless you speedily alter your course, you and your Country are gone!!!!!! For God Almighty will tear up the very face of the earth!!"\textsuperscript{105}

What we have uncovered is Walker's vigorous attempt to arm African Americans with counter-hegemonic language and basis for action from a religious perspective. Inasmuch as the Constitution was to impact the citizens of the United States "religiously", through his *Appeal* he sought to empower blacks with the same constitutional force. His religious message was clear: until America fully embraced the tenets of its own "sacred" Constitution, black America should be governed and driven by the (re)constitutional language of his *Appeal*, which was governed by a *Higher* law.

The goal in offering these selected historical case studies was to offer examples of recalibrational spirituality or curative recalibration construed more generally. These examples are the ways in which the hermeneutic of reclamation, as introduced in chapter five, gets applied to "real life" situations. In each case attempted to show the way in which curative recalibrational thought and practices are sewn in the fabric of cultural exchange and critique. These often harsh yet necessary critiques of American culture and political thought required multiple voices and several lines of discourse. My contention is that curative recalibrational thought functions in a myriad of expressions and ways of

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 42.
telling or, as it were, retelling the human story. The human story, then, becomes the substance of this curative activity, which in essence seeks to establish broken selves as whole and fully human selves through various forms of expression, whether declarative language about the divine, or a refashioning of language by way of cultural critique. Cast in terms of religion, this analysis reveals the way in which I see the function of religion playing itself out in the African American context. So, whether in the form of a changed or recalibrated read of the country’s “sacred” text, the U.S. Constitution, or in David Walker’s actual labor to offer counter language with the goal encouraging America to live out and make available the freedoms of its creeds, recalibrational engagement can be seen.

On the strictly religious front, curative recalibration approaches religious language used to undermine the personhood and agency of a race of people and recreates religious language anew. I offered examples by way of counter-conceptions of God as an important way this idea gets played out. Accordingly, a dueling conception of the divine did not render God changed or different in form from, say, the planter class’ idea of God. Rather, through curative recalibration, a fuller scope of God’s divine attributes are made available to the oppressed and offer them transformative spiritual tools for life renewal through a changed posture in the face of suffering. This life renewal is the essence of the curative nature of this process, which seeks to make broken humans whole.

The overriding example of this religious action and extraction came in the form of unique biblical appropriation. Curative recalibration, then, brings to light a “way” of approaching the sacred text of Christianity. As used by those in sovereign authority, the Bible can have detrimental effects on the subjugated class. However, when that same
Bible is recalibrated by the subjugated class, wherein the fuller scope of liberative biblical ideas are available for use, healing can take place. As we saw, the Bible as “machine” is not principally “changed” in the recalibration process. Rather, recalibrating its primary functions so that the machine works to its fullest extent reveals the essence of the process and the reason the Bible can at once be a document of liberation, a prescriptive sourcebook, and a *re-mapper* of social reality for the oppressed. In each case, the seeker of justice and fuller life possibilities makes use of tools that allow for their agency to be exhibited in some way. They make for themselves a world, to whatever extent possible, where liberation in the form of reclamation is the norm. This activity is not results based, but rather sees full merit in the changed posture of the human life, who continues and strives to become and maintain wholeness.

**Conclusion**

Considered herein was my attempt to better understand the mechanism or nuts and bolts of black religion. The reader must surely have uncovered that I see black religion in terms of an active engagement with culture, society, politics, and counter-religious thought and action. Accordingly, this chapter offered an application of the hermeneutic of reclamation by introducing my idea of the function of black Christian religion during the antebellum period. The nomenclature given to this religious function is *curative recalibration*. As a consequence we were exposed to pertinent socio-historical examinations in the form of case studies: Frederick Douglass’ interpretive shift regarding the U.S. Constitution, the slaves’ “religious” quest for literacy, dueling or counter-conceptions of God, and David Walker’s Appeal cast as religio-cultural
recalibration activity and as a curative recalibration tool in counter-distinction to the Constitution. What did we gain from these particular examinations? From Douglass my goal was simply to illustrate how I see curative recalibration working within American culture. I connect this idea to a general style of black cultural engagement of the day, which includes the work of black abolitionist thinkers like David Walker.

In terms of slaves' desire of arduous labor for literacy, we faced head on black responses to the tactics of the planter class using language against them. The issue here was several-fold. That is, not only did the assumptions of the language function as the enemy of the enslaved, it was also safeguarded from them, making Baldwin's call for change or David Walker’s call to subvert literally impossible. Yet, this quest, as we uncovered, took on life as it sought to usurp authority, whether covertly or overtly, to gain the ability to read. This quest was cast as a religious task in and of itself because it revealed an idea that the ability to read had supernatural tendencies and the ability to read afforded a person great religious power.

From this backdrop I brought to bare the nature and function of black religion in the illustrative form of biblical-religious and cultural-political engagement. In short, curative recalibration offers an entry way into understanding black Christianity and, as I will argue in later work, black religion in general. Further, this idea of religious function makes evident the implications that necessitate its presence in culture and society. As we saw, the principle intent in reclaiming activity is to recalibrate harmful uses of biblical language and make them suitable for African American use. This process literally takes the waste of the enemy’s language and fashions it anew. The end result is a black religious adherent whose posture is changed in the face of great adversity. Such a posture
change is curative, granting a healing balm, that makes whole bodies that are figuratively, spiritually, and literally stripped of dignity in the wounding process.

What I have presented is meant to be the beginning of what I believe will be a relevant discussion within black religious studies. I hold that curative recalibration expresses black religious action that is complex and unyielding in the process of making the wounded whole. Thus applied, this hermeneutic reveals a certain utility that is resonant in the faith claims of certain black Christians who have sought with vigor to fight against their sufferings. Properly applied, such a theory on the function of black religion also aligns with Cornel West’s call for a “prophetic Christianity.” In short, this is a function of a Christianity that perpetually faces oppression with full intent and applied activity to subvert it.
Conclusion: Contemporary Possibilities for Recalibrational Spirituality

Among even the myriad socio-economic differences between the members of my predominantly African American Baptist church congregation in Houston, TX, one thing remains clear. Though from various "sides of the tracks," this church family would jointly acknowledge and believe in a God who has brought them through and out of tough situations and hardships. In spontaneous fashion during a recent service, while the "Spirit" was having its way in service and the frenzy was high, my pastor, Rev. Dr. T.R. Williams, belted out in song,

"I wouldn't have a religion,
I couldn't feel sometimes..."

At this the congregation, already caught in the swell of spiritual emotion, latched on to these words as they reflected on their personal faith in a God. Pastor Williams continued

"There's a man over the river,
Giving sight to the blind..."

Stopping there would have been enough to send the church over the edge in celebrating as they reflected on their experiences of God's power to heal and improve their dire social conditions. But the good pastor was by no means going to "quench the Spirit." He offered another nugget of God's power to preserve, heal, and make the wounded whole.

In a final melodious exclamation, he sings

"You talkin' 'bout Jesus,
He's a friend of mine!"
Then the congregation exploded. Everyone reflected on the intimate relationship with the
divine victor over evil and suffering. That morning you would have witnessed several
“church mothers” kicking off their shoes, men and women alike dancing in the aisles,
random screams and shouts of simultaneous joy in triumph and lamenting of pain. Sweat
and tears simultaneously roll down the cheeks of many who find themselves overcome by
the swell of the spirit in the place. This little song would reverberate throughout the
church, over 1,500 people singing it together with what seemed to be a single thought in
mind: God has and will make a way for a struggling people. This thought, in some sense,
is the cornerstone of the hope of the black church and I contend is sewn into the religious
thought of African Americans in general.

For a moment I want to think of the hope I have described a bit differently. That
is to say, what may too be exhibited in this and the multitude of similar “black church”
experiences is the very essence and nature of recalibrational spirituality—or, religious
activity that critically engages culture and society for the purpose of readjusting harmful
and dehumanizing religious expressions for curative use. Themes of healing and
wholeness serve to identify the nature of this form of spirituality and faith experience.
Therefore, recalibrational spirituality is best seen as a principal part of the black Christian
experience. While it doesn’t represent to entire spectrum of Christian life and
experience, it serves as a paramount recourse through which this oppressed population
begins to see themselves another way. What they come to realize is that they too are
God’s people and, even in the face of the absurd, they live within this frame of mind with
a changed and strengthened posture.
What may be seen then, within the traditional Baptist church, is a multilayered form of Christian thought where a complex body of believers intersect on a particular reality regarding their individual faith: human suffering. By way of their faith they seek to extract from the biblical narrative a Christian expression that actively pushes against social ills and affixes undying hope on a God who sees them as whole persons. In short, they are able to see themselves as God’s beautiful and marvelous creations. The reality is clear; many in the contemporary church have had to live through tough, even unfortunate experiences. I reflect on the words of two Houston pastors I interviewed regarding the extent to which issues of suffering and oppression remain a part of their message of the Gospel. Rev. Dr. T.R. Williams, Senior Pastor of New Faith Church and my pastor holds that:

“When Christ came he did not come to eradicate suffering, but to redefine it. He helps us to appreciate that suffering is a relative term. It was relative because Christ’s whole presentation was about relationship to the eternal. So, he doesn’t look at suffering in the same way. Therefore, he takes the sufferer to a new realm altogether. Though one may suffer, that person is more blessed because he or she is connected with Christ through identification.”

According to Rev. Dr. Marcus Cosby, Senior Pastor of Wheeler Avenue Baptist Church:

“Part of what we can claim as the “challenge” is the notion of evil that is expressed in society, through racism. Racism is evil personified. It is the result of the influence of evil. This evil, though allowed by God, is not constructed by God. It is therefore good to stand against it. The good that came out of the Christ Event can still transform the evil in the world. And those who are advocates of good should work to stamp out this evil according to a belief and motivation of the Christ Event. The reality is, we still have to deal with the evil that motivated the Christ Event.”

The thoughts expressed by these pastors reflect the way in which Christianity has functioned for many African Americans over the years. At its best, the church has given them a voice to express their concerns over their dire social realities. What seems clear is
that the contemporary concerns of the Black Church remain tied to the concerns
governing the argument of *Making the Wounded Whole*.

As these pastors articulated, part of what the contemporary black church faces is
the challenge of encouraging wounded people that their identification with a triumphal
Christ is not in vain. As leaders in the church they are involved in a continual effort to
create spaces wherein people can find wholeness and meaning through fuller expressions
of their selfhood. As a principal aim, I have attempted to assess and lay out the historical
and antecedent thought driving this form of contemporary church concern for suffering in
an unjust society.

Religious engagement along these lines, as I have attempted to present in *Making
the Wounded Whole*, facilitates a symbolic reversal or counter meaning. The desire to live
as a complete and healthy self within a cultural milieu of a death is the stuff of the central
argument of *Making the Wounded Whole*. Facing dehumanization and systems that
sought the maintenance of social death, blacks required avenues toward full expression of
life. This pursuit of healthy life options transitions into a lifestyle of recalibrational
spirituality that maintains a posture of boundless expression. In doing this, the task of
recalibrating uses tools meant to harm and shapes them in ways that allow for the
establishment of new selfhood and identity. One is made whole in that he or she is able
to simply be human in counter distinction to what is said about their bodies and souls.

Our work progressed in two movements. A socio-historical analysis of black
antebellum social placement and the maltreatment connected to this position was
performed in the initial three chapters while the second three chapters discussed aspects
of the nature and function of black Christianity in response to this treatment. Chapter one
gave attention to challenges severe maltreatment poses against extracting usable pieces of black religious history and experience. This challenge was discussed in terms of its effects not just for unearthing and understanding history, but also opacity of a graspmable black identity. From this premise I promoted hermeneutics as a possible way of effectively becoming acquainted relatively scant sources in order to uncover the nature of African American religious identity during the antebellum period.

In chapter two I did a bit more digging to excavate the specifics of bodily maltreatment as a basis for a particular expression of Christianity. Here I inquired into justifications of slavery as an underpinning for chapter two's overall argument that blacks during the antebellum period, notably in the South, existed in a unique social and biopolitical position that I termed corporeal constriction. This term was used as the principle way I seek to identify black antebellum social reality and relates to the destructive ways in which these particular bodies were metaphorically projected and physically confined. This social dynamic included a constant proliferation of ideas offered by the antebellum planter class against black bodies regarding their putrid natures even while simultaneously finding splendor in this flesh as connected to its potential to secure profits for the planter class. Unearthing the material features of corporeal constriction, black bodies, coiled as a boa constrictor holds its prey prior to consumption, physically experienced the ramifications of the anti-beauty project by way of physical maltreatment in medical practices or sanctioned killings. Accordingly, African American antebellum and postbellum experience was revealed as unique and formative for a particular religious ethos.
Drawing directly from the second chapter's appraisal of the dire socio-political plight of antebellum blacks, chapter three probed the significance of private space as the arena for oppression. It thus gives special attention to the important role a state of exception, as Agamben would have us consider it, plays in the making of history. In like manner, I posited that antebellum slave plantations and, to a large degree, the U.S. South at that time, functioned this way. Within this U.S. south, a state of exception existed wherein the whiteplanter and sovereign class and southern aristocracy could maintain slave order through a compression of law that denied even minimal human rights from the slaves. Within this confined space, which I name the macabre arena of racial oppression, black bodies are consumed according to the needs and requirements of the dominant class.

In the second movement I went about uncovering the principle function of Christianity as practiced by blacks in the U.S. South during the antebellum period. My focus thus shifted to the tactics blacks used to make themselves whole through Christianity. Chapter four set the basis for this distinct experientially focused Christian praxis. Beginning with the clarion call to “be amended, five-fifths human,” I began to disclose a core desire to amend the wounded self within black Christian thought. This wounding, as perpetrated upon blacks by those with sovereign authority over them, encourages an innate desire to be healed, or made whole. I see this self-amending nature and approach to hegemonic society and culture as the basis of what forms the norm that fuels a unique modality of black Christianity. Subsequently, I inquired as to what the marker of this form of Christianity was. In so doing I inquired as to its look, feel, and representative texture. This marker was both viewable symbol and connected to broader
symbolic experience and reflects the manifestation of themes of healing and wholeness. Accordingly, the marker represented the metamorphosis of the black body into the archetype of a *liberated human affixed to a divine victor*. I am arguing for more that a spiritual partnering with the divine. For our purposes this archetype exhibited mimetic tendencies toward the divine victor in the form of Jesus Christ. This archetype’s primary work was to secure (for itself and others) and express full human liberation. Ultimately, the “dark” marker of black religion projects the freedom to labor towards wholeness of body, mind, and spirit while simultaneously creating space for social advancement.

In chapter five I introduced the *hermeneutic of reclamation* and contended for it as a viable tool for capturing the nature of religious activity amongst oppressed blacks, notably with regard to Christian experience. Accounting for preexisting methods of assessing the historical realities of black maltreatment, the reclamation hermeneutic was offered as a way of extending the conversation about what it means to be black and Christian in connection to racial oppression in the United States.

By way of application, chapter six closed the dissertation by revealing the function of black Christianity. I held that *curative recalibration* represents the form the hermeneutic of reclamation takes when in action. I used selected historical case studies to show how this type of Christo-religious expression looks in lived experience. Curative recalibration offers another way of understanding black Christianity. I put forth the idea that the principle intent in reclaiming activity is to recalibrate harmful uses of biblical language and make them suitable for African American use. This process takes the waste and refuse of harmful uses of language and the biblical narrative and refashions them. The result is a black Christian adherent with a changed posture in the face of great
adversity. This posture change amends blacks whose bodies and social positions are broken by abuse, making them whole again.

Future possibilities also exist for this form of black spirituality outside of the normative structure of the church. For example, I therefore plan to explore the nature of this form of spirituality through an interrogation of rap music. Analyzing what I call "Prophetic Rap," I will study its nascent features as a potent tool for addressing issues of oppression, marginalization, and disenfranchisement within contemporary black culture. As a musical genre born out of and making use of various struggle motifs, rap music religiously responds to the absurd, often in radical fashion, to secure space broadly defined for those who have been socially despised. My argument is simply that the prophetic nature of certain strands of rap music is recalibrational and spiritual at its core. Through its declarative affirming statements about urban (read as African American) life, it offers an alternate voice, fortified to critically engaging culture and society with a stern eye on reordering hegemonic socio-religious realities. Prophetic rap is recalibrational in that it makes use of the societal negatives largely plaguing urban youth fashions ideas and sentiments in ways that allow broken people to see themselves anew. Prophetic rap also makes use of spiritual discourse not only to relay broad counter-cultural ideas about life, but also to give hope to the listener. Finally, its curative qualities are revealed in the way its affirming declarative statements are manifested in the language and lived experience of youths and those in hip-hop culture in general. Its counter-cultural nature means that it is sometimes abrasive but remains steadfast in its approach to offer new perspectives about the nature of black social reality. Primary among the artists and groups I plan to
survey in this investigation are Goodie Mob, Outkast, Cee-lo (as a solo artist), Chuck D, 
The Roots, Little Brother, Common, Talib Kweli, Kanye West, and others.

I do not hold that all facets of rap music engage in a declarative/restorative 
activity. However, there are examples of a declarative and prophetic voice in hip-hop, 
which signifies the recalibration sentiments I have described. Within this space prophetic 
rap music is a continuation of the creative manner in which meaning is made out of the 
absurd world by promoting a style of living through which a sense of self and community 
is forged in a hostile environment. Even more importantly, rap music in a certain 
sense deals with the ultimate issues of human existence. Social meanings are disclosed 
and played out within these “secular” modes of musical expression, which, in the end, 
have something to say about religion and religious experience. In the end, I hope to show 
that recalibrational spirituality has many layers and tentacles in its response to dominant 
culture.

What curative recalibration spiritual sensibilities reveal are human stories. 
Recalibrational spirituality illuminates a style of lived life in the face of tumultuous social 
struggle. Whether seen in early expressions of African American Christianity, 
contemporary forms of the black church, or even in a non-formal religious medium such 
as rap music, faith and hope are wed with resistance and ingenuity to create lives that are 
seen and lived differently. Making the Wounded Whole has uncovered a fresh cultural 
and experiential framing of black Christian interaction and expression. With an eye on 
the formative nature of identity (re)formation, it has given space for an additional way of

capturing what means to be black and religious in a society and culture that in large measure requires the undoing of black humanity.


Caputo, John D. "On Not Knowing Who We Are: Madness, Hermeneutics and the Night of Truth in Foucault" in Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious...


