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What Meaneth This?
A Postmodern ‘Theory’ of African American Religious Experience

By

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ABSTRACT

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It is the intention of this dissertation to provide a ‘theory’ of African American religious experience that is guided by postmodern critical thought, with particular emphasis on methodologies attempting to grasp what is referred to as the quotidian, the ordinary, but primarily as “everyday life.” It is my contention that this constitutes a promising approach that African American religionists should consider. Indeed, for almost forty years, there has been one dominant interpretative lens for the study of African American religious experience, often referred to as a hermeneutics of liberation. It is my contention that this orientation, with its emphasis on the macroscopic, is markedly inadequate. I maintain that what is needed is a focus on the microscopic. Moreover, I also assert that if there is to be a locus for opposition to oppression, it is to be found on the level of the “everyday” – that which is often passed over as insignificant or irrelevant.
I wish to thank the members of my committee – Dr. Anthony B. Pinn, Dr. James D. Faubion, and Dr. Gregory Kaplan – for seeing me through to the end of this process. Also, thanks to peers and friends who supported me in this process. Finally, to my entire family but especially to my wife Charvonne who keeps me grounded and sane, much love.
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What Meaneth This?

A Postmodern ‘Theory’ of African American Religious Experience

Presented in partial requirement

for the

PhD in Religious Studies

Rice University

by

Torin Dru Alexander

Anthony Bernard Pinn, Principal Advisor

James Faubion and Gregory Kaplan, Dissertation Committee Members
Introduction

Bewildered we are, and passion-tost, mad with the madness of a mobbed and mocked and murdered people; straining at the armposts of Thy Throne, we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of our stolen fathers, by the tears of our dead mothers, by the very blood of Thy crucified Christ: What meaneth this? Tell us the Plan; give us the Sign!

Keep not thou silence, O God!

Sit no longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and dumb to our dumb suffering. Surely, Thou too art not white, O Lord, a pale, bloodless, heartless thing?

From “A Litany at Atlanta” by W. E. B. Du Bois

It is the intention of this dissertation to provide a ‘theory’ of African American religious experience that is guided by postmodern critical thought, with particular emphasis on methodologies attempting to grasp what is referred to as the quotidian, the ordinary, but primarily as “everyday life.” It is my contention that this constitutes a promising approach that African American religionists should consider. Indeed, for almost forty years, there has been one dominant interpretative lens for the study of African American religious experience, often referred to as a hermeneutics of liberation. It is my contention that this orientation, with its emphasis on the macroscopic, is markedly inadequate. I maintain that what is needed is a focus on the microscopic.

Moreover, I also assert that if there is to be a locus for resistance or opposition to


\[2\] I am uncomfortable with the term “theory” due to what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “theoreticism” [M. M. Bakhtin, Michael Holquist, and Vadim Liapunov, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, 1st ed., *University of Texas Press Slavic Series ; No. 10* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 11-27] which is the reduction of human creativity to a system. Theory, in this sense, impoverishes the truth of human life by subordinating all the complexity and messiness to a static system. Yet, the use of the term “theory” persists even among those who oppose the conventional meaning. I considered having the word appear written under erasure, i.e. theory. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes erasure as “the strategy of using the only available language while not subscribing to its premises. . . . Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary it remains legible” [Spivak’s introduction to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), Xiv]. I have opted here and in the title of the dissertation to use single quotes.
oppression, it is to be found on the level of the “everyday,” that which is often passed over as insignificant or irrelevant.

Unfortunately, an intentional engagement with theory and method has not been characteristic of African religionists. Indeed, I would contend that a review of African American religious scholarship from Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Benjamin E. Mays to more contemporary scholars such as C. Eric Lincoln, J. Deotis Roberts, or James Hal Cone would substantiate this claim. This assertion is not meant to denigrate the work of previous generations of scholars of African American religion, nor should it be interpreted as a vulgar valorization of theory qua theory, or method qua method. It is my contention, however, that conscientious scholars would want to know the strengths as well as the deficiencies associated with the tools they bring to bear in their research. Moreover, I maintain that African American religious scholars’ lack of serious engagement with issues of a theoretical and methodological nature have led to a rather anemic analysis of African American religious experience.

The dominant method utilized in the study of African American religious experience over the course of the last several decades has been a “hermeneutic of liberation” with liberation construed as a collective, communal, coherent, and coordinated endeavor over against oppressive forms of power that are macroscopic, often monolithic and hierarchical. Such power is associated with issues of white supremacy, industrial capitalism, sexism, and imperialism. Yet, as one looks at various African American religious communities, *in the main* they are devoid of revolutionary or militant theologies. As groups, they are neither chiliastic nor ascetic world-transforming.³ An

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³ As various scholars have noted, particularly in such studies as Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee
interpretive and diagnostic challenge for the religious scholar involves understanding these religious communities’ engagement with the world, whether it is the quite limited possibilities that many accord to the improvement of the present world, or the tendency toward the development of theodicies of reconciliation or redemptive suffering.

**Context**

The argument presented here will be important to those engaged in the study of religious experience in general and African American religious experience in particular. Moreover, it is the author’s hope that those engaged in fields and/or disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, and critical and cultural theory would find the work edifying.

In my review of the literature on African American religion, I have yet to come across the use of theories of “everyday life and practice” in the study of African American religious experience. Indeed, it appears that little scholarship has been done with respect to the concept of “everyday life” and religion. For the most part, these

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Press, 2002) or C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990). A number of different topologies can be mapped out for African American religion, depending on the schematization one wishes to apply. In the case of Baer and Singer, they have a two-dimensional grid, one axis being attitudinal (accommodationist or rejectionist) and the other in terms social strategies (material/social needs vs. emotional needs). Each of the four categories in which they classified the different religious bodies occupied a different quadrant: Mainline churches; Conversionist, Pentecostal, and Holiness Churches; Messianic/Nationalists bodies; and Thaumaturgical/Spiritualist tradition.

In the case of Lincoln and Mamiya, they engaged in what they called a “dialectics” with three oppositional relationships, which they defined as the priestly vs. the prophetic, the this-worldly vs. the other-worldly, and the universal vs. the particular. It is interesting to note that the first two pairings resemble those of Baer and Singer. In is clear in both instances that these scholars also see their work as refuting claims by their previous scholars, such as E. Franklin Frazier and his sociological work on the Negro church and the Negro family, as well the famous study of Gary T. Marx that came out during the sixties. Both Frazier and Marx paint Black religion as otherworldly.

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4 Two exceptions are in the work of Arnold M. Eisen and Gregory Kaplan, such as Arnold M. Eisen’s, *Rethinking Modern Judaism : Ritual, Commandment, Community, Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).
theories are closely identified with various trajectories in continental thought; e.g. the phenomenological tradition, the Marxist and Critical Theory tradition, and the structuralist/post-structuralist/postmodern tradition. While it is the case that numerous scholars in the field of religious studies have availed themselves of the larger continental tradition, for the most part this has not been true of those engaged in the study of African American religion.5

In appropriating the work of theorists of the everyday and the ordinary, one is confronted with that which we are the most familiar, but when carefully scrutinized, often appears strange if not unfathomable. The everyday is characterized by ambiguities, instabilities, and equivocation. For a thinker like Lefebvre, this involves the refusal to reduce everyday life to an arena for the reproduction of dominant social relations; for a scholar such as de Certeau, the everyday is precisely the sight of substantive resistance, revolution and transformation.6

Another possible benefit of this project might be providing some insight into why Black theology has largely failed to grab the imagination and to quicken the spirits of significant portions of the African American community. Moreover, a more robust understanding of what constitutes African American religion and African American religious experience is important in the contemporary context as it relates to questions of historicity and continuity of African American culture and its associate religious practices and expressions. Again, it is my desire that theories and methods proffered here will lead

5 See Chapter 3 on African American religionists.
to a new way of understanding African American religious experience broadly construed. Indeed, it is my aspiration that this work might be part of a new paradigm.7

**An Overview**

Chapter 1 provides critical reflection on the manner in which religious studies has explored the nature and meaning of religious experience. In this chapter, I will define what I mean by religious experience and then go on to assert that an analysis that accentuates a functional (explanatory) construal supplemented with the substantive (interpretative) is to be preferred to strict functional or substantive construal.

Chapter 2 presents three examples of African American religious experience that will constitute the data upon which the theories and methodologies under consideration will be brought to bear in subsequent chapters. Here, the descriptive methodology deployed for this purpose is phenomenological. It is my contention that such an approach best facilitates an encounter with the world of experience as it reveals itself, in its givenness. It is my intention to provide a fuller, more complex description of the everyday, and subsequently, a better picture of how religious experience shapes, alters, modifies, or affects the everyday of African Americans.

Chapter 3 provides critical reflection on the manner in which African American religious studies, principally the disciplines of theology, philosophy, and history of

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7 An archetype of such a shift is that involving Newtonian physics at the end of the nineteenth century, which represented a degenerating tradition unable to solve the problems it was creating. Another research approach was needed, namely quantum mechanics. For a discussion on the nature of scientific revolutions and changing paradigms, see Thomas S. Kuhn's, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), as well as the discourses between Kuhn and Imre Lakatos. The interesting aspect for me with respect to the "revolution" that took place in physics is one of scale. Newtonian mechanics deals with the macroscopic while quantum mechanics applies to the domain of the microscopic. It is my contention that the dichotomy of macroscopic and microscopic applies to cultural/critical theory as well.
religion, have explored the nature and meaning of African American religious experience. Through this review of the literature, the weaknesses with respect to theory and method in African American religious studies are noted – particularly as they relate to the overwhelming concern with collective transformation over and against “everyday” practices on the individual level.

In Chapter 4, it is my intention to present a theoretical and methodological approach to the study of African American religious experience that emphasizes the lived “everyday” experiences of black folk. Methodologically and theoretically, I believe that there is an intellectual tradition – the tradition of Heidegger, Bakhtin, Lefebvre, and de Certeau and their concentration on everydayness, coping practices, technologies of self, habits, strategies and tactics – which is particularly useful.

As mentioned above, the dominant theoretical and methodological posture adopted in the study of African American religion has been a hermeneutics of liberation, which emphasizes forms of power that are macroscopic, often monolithic and hierarchical. Subsequently, less attention has been given to power on the level of the microscopic, e.g., the microphysics of power and the micro-political.

In Chapter 5, I demonstrate the advantage of an analysis of African American religious experience in terms of “everydayness” as opposed to the macroscopic liberative hermeneutical norm used by most African American religionists in the study of such

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8 One of the challenges in deploying such theories is how encompassing is the concept of everydayness. It is certainly the case that the theorists in question do not have in mind the social lives of African Americans. Their referents or data are drawn in most instances from twentieth century Europeans. Part of the goal of this project, therefore, is to show that these theories do indeed address the issues of African Americans and are not simply other broad categories that suffer from the same or similar defects as what I have called the dominant interpretive model in African American religion.
experiences. I achieve this by way of applying the approaches to the descriptive data associated with the case studies presented in Chapter 2.

In Chapter 6, I offer concluding observations and remarks related to the research presented in the dissertation. I assert that theories and methodologies associated with “everydayness” as I have presented might open new horizons of meaning and explanation for African American religious studies. Indeed, I maintain that their appropriation should be part of a needed paradigm shift within the discourse that is African American religious studies.
Chapter 1 – An Overview of Religious Experience

Objective

In this chapter, “An Overview of Religious Experience,” I shall provide critical reflection on the manner in which religious studies has explored the nature and meaning of religious experience. I will first provide a history of the dominant approach to the phenomenon in question. I will then point out various problems associated with this intellectual tradition – problems that are primarily theoretical and methodological, but also which ultimately result in a fundamental mischaracterization of the phenomenon called religious experience. I will then give my definition of religious experience, going on to assert what I contend is an appropriate theoretical and methodological perspective that is interdisciplinary and that privileges functional explanation over, but not at the exclusion of, substantive interpretation. This will set the foundation for Chapter 2, “Current Approaches to the Study of African American Religious Experience,” which to the extent that theory and methodology have been matters of concern among African American religionists; a substantive interpretive orientation has been de rigueur in terms of attempting to comprehend African American religious experience.

As I stated in my introduction to the dissertation, the central problem that has beleaguered and invigorated my intellectual curiosity to date involves the nature of African American religious experience. But before one deals with the specific phenomenon as it relates to persons of African Americans, it behooves one to ask, “What is this ‘experience’ that people – scholars and lay – refer to as ‘religious’?” Theologians and philosophers, as well as scholars associated with such disciplines as sociology,
psychology, anthropology, and history have wrestled with an assortment of experiences, events, incidents, and occasions to which they have affixed the nomenclature of ‘the religious’. Not surprisingly, they have arrived at a variety of theories. Also not surprising, these theories are formed and informed by the particular methodological dispositions associated with their particular field or discipline. Subsequently, there have been schematizations attempting to describe, explain, and interpret these events, experiences, and expressions.

Introduction

According to James Alfred Martin, Jr. in the article “Religious Experience” in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, the concept of religious experience is logically and practically complex. Further, it is rich in various nuances allied with those who have sought to study it. It reflects both general theories of experience and specific theories of religion. In his essay entitled “Experience” in Mark Taylor’s *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Robert H. Sharf also notes that term and category of experience is quite complex and is fraught with numerous difficulties. Wayne Proudfoot notes in his seminal text *Religious Experience*, that while as a phenomenon religious experience may be ubiquitous, as a concept or idea it is relatively new. Indeed, the concepts religious and experience are really products of the Enlightenment. Moreover, as a category, it is rather broad, its boundaries undefined, porous, and elusive.

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As one attempts to develop an understanding of religious experience, I maintain that the researcher is confronted with at least two significant issues. The first issue is the epistemological issue. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of knowledge, its presuppositions and foundations, and its extent and validity. In other words it deals with the question of how we know what we know, and what qualifies as knowledge. In terms of the relationship of experience to knowledge, it is common to frame the discourse in terms of awareness, where awareness comprises a human being’s perception and cognitive reaction to a condition or event. It is important to note, however, that awareness does not necessarily imply understanding, just an ability to be conscious of, to feel, or to perceive.

The second issue has to do with that which is encountered when referring to religious experience. Phenomenologically speaking, with respect to the matter of intentionality, one is always conscious of something. Intentionality is always directed. However, one of the challenges for a phenomenologist of religions is the nature of the object, entity, or ‘thing’ of which one is aware. An experience can come to consciousness in a myriad of ways. If one is seeing, they are seeing some visual object; if one is imagining, one’s imagining or imagination presents an imaginary object; if one is engaged in remembering, one is intentioning a past object; and if one is judging, one is intending a state of affairs or a fact. Moreover, when dealing with religion and the religious, issues of perception are often bound to arguments of justification. In other words, in terms of religion, what one encounters or experiences is held to matter a great deal, to use Tillichian language, it is often a matter of ultimate concern.

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Through the course of this chapter I will refer to the first issue as the *epistemological issue* and the latter as the *veridical issue*. In tracking the history and nuances of the concept of religious experience, these two issues have been inextricably linked. After carefully rehearsing the development of the concept of religious experience in the field that comes to be known as religious studies, I will make a case that this association need not obtain. Indeed, it is my contention that it is the source of much confusion in attempting to schematize the phenomenon of religious experience.

**Theorists of Religious Experience**

The notion or concept of religious experience in the field of religious studies is perhaps most closely associated with the eighteenth and nineteenth century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher. This is particularly of import as Schleiermacher is also deemed by most scholars of religion as the individual responsible for the course of theology in the modern era. Indeed, modern theology is frequently marked as beginning with the publication in 1799 of Schleiermacher’s collection of essays entitled *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*.

In *On Religion*, Schleiermacher offers his phenomenological description of religious experience in the effort to persuade his colleagues who were a part of the Romantic Movement in eighteenth century Germany. A community consisting of poets, artists, and musicians, they, for the most part, rejected religion. Indeed, it is they who are the cultured despisers.
Schleiermacher wished to show his associates that what they truly reviled was not religion but dogma and institutions that result from mistaking external forms for the inner life of the spirit. These critics

(S)eek knowledge; their wisdom is only directed toward a lamentable empiricism, and thus religion can be nothing else for them than a dead letter, a holy article in the constitution in which nothing is real.  

Conversely, real piety or faith was associated with the spiritual integrity and sense of harmony with the universe which they sought in the aesthetic and cultural life. His argument over the course of several essays is that the characterization of religion as propositional truths (a position associated with Protestant orthodoxy) or grounded in ecclesiastical authority (conversely, the position associated with Catholicism) was not true religion. Rather, religion was related to *experience*, intuition, and a sensibility that was much more akin to an artistic sensibility. Schleiermacher characterized this as the sense or taste of the infinite.

True science is complete vision; true practice is culture and art self-produced; true religion is sense and taste for the Infinite. To wish to have true science or true practice without religion, or to imagine it is possessed, is obstinate, arrogant delusion, and culpable error.  

The contemplation of the pious is the immediate consciousness of the universal existence of all finite things in and through the Infinite, and all temporal things in and through the Eternal... Religion is to seek this and find it in all that lives and moves, in all growth and change, in all doing and suffering. It is to have life and to know life in immediate feeling, only as such an existence in the Infinite and Eternal... Wherefore it is a life in the infinite nature of the Whole, in the One and in the All, in God, having and possessing all things in God and God in all. Yet religion is not knowledge and science, either of the world or of God. Without being

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knowledge, it recognizes knowledge and science. In itself is an affection, a revelation of the Infinite in the finite, God being seen in it and it in God.\textsuperscript{15}

Moreover, religious experience, as an intuition of the whole, is associated with an immediacy that raises it above all error and misunderstanding.\textsuperscript{16}

All is immediately true in religion, for except immediately how could anything arise? But that only is immediate which has not yet passed through the stage of idea, but has grown up purely in the feeling.\textsuperscript{17}

As a sense or perception that precedes and is independent of thought, religious experience cannot be confused with doctrine, dogma, or practice and thus does not infringe upon the domain of science. This feeling\textsuperscript{18} or intuition is also intentional, in that it is directed toward an “object,” the Infinite.

Sense and object mingle and unite, then each returns to its place, and the object rent from sense is a perception, and you rent from the object for yourselves, a feeling. It is the earlier moment I mean, which you always experience and yet never experience... It is the holy wedlock of the Universe with the incarnated Reason for a creative, productive embrace. It is immediate, raised above all error and misunderstanding. You lie directly on the bosom of the infinite world. In that moment, you are its soul.\textsuperscript{19}

This understanding of religious experience will form the basis of Schleiermacher’s later work, \textit{The Christian Faith}. Therein, according to Schleiermacher, theology is not the product of metaphysical speculation or a set of beliefs about the world; rather, it is a systematization of the doctrine of a particular religious community at a particular time. Doctrine, moreover, is the expression of the “religious affections in that

\begin{itemize}
  \item[\textsuperscript{15}] Schleiermacher, \textit{On Religion}, 36.
  \item[\textsuperscript{16}] Schleiermacher, \textit{On Religion}, 43.
  \item[\textsuperscript{17}] Schleiermacher, \textit{On Religion}, 54.
  \item[\textsuperscript{18}] Paul Tillich reminds us that feeling for Schleiermacher is distinct from subjective emotion. According to Tillich, “It is the impact of the universe upon us in the depths of our being, which transcends subject and object.” Paul Tillich, \textit{A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism}, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1972), 392.
  \item[\textsuperscript{19}] Schleiermacher, \textit{On Religion} 43.
\end{itemize}
community.” Thus, “Christian doctrines are accounts of the Christian religious affections set forth in speech.”

Again, for Schleiermacher, the subject matter of theology is not God, but rather the self-consciousness of the religious believer in the context of his or her community. Or put in another way, it is not humans speaking about God, but rather humans reflecting on their own and others’ experience of the infinite, the universe, the Whence. The theologian is a phenomenologist and a hermeneutist, who is to provide a faithful interpretation of the religious experiences of a particular community.

These religious experiences are recorded in a community’s language, signs and symbols; e.g. hymns, prayers, journals, sermons, ritual/liturgy, and art. The task of the theologian is then not so much to construct but rather to “describe, arrange, and systematize.” However, the authority for particular religious claims lies in the religious experiences of a particular community.

The common element in all howsoever diverse expressions of piety, by which these are conjointly distinguished from all other feelings, or, in other words, the self-identical essence of piety, is this: the consciousness of being absolutely dependent, or which, is the same thing, of being in relation to God.

As regards the identification of absolute dependence with ‘relation to God’ on our proposition: this is to be understood in the sense that the Whence of our receptive and active existence, as implied in this self-consciousness, is to be designated by the word ‘God,’ and that this is for us the really original signification of the word.

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Schleiermacher’s theory of religion and religious experience emerges in response to the overturning of the classic philosophical arguments for the existence of God, proofs dismantled by the work of Kant and Hume. Their work effectively precluded classic appeals to metaphysics. Indeed, to the extent that philosophy retained a concept of God, it was associated with Kant’s limited understanding of God as a heuristic idea that served the purpose of science, or God as that which insures the teleological relationship of the ‘good’ and the ‘just’ necessary for morality.

Nevertheless, in keeping with this same tradition, Schleiermacher embraces the move from metaphysics to epistemology, and subsequently a turn to the subject. Yet, Schleiermacher’s project is an apologetic in the sense that his argument is an attempt to regain some of the lost integrity of religion. For Schleiermacher, religion grounded in experience is irreducible to science or morality, and thus religious belief and practice should be freed from any requirement that they be justified by reference to nonreligious thought or action. Moreover, it was his hope that such a move would prevent conflict between religious doctrine and scientific knowledge. Rather, religion and doctrine were understood as grounded in a moment or experience intrinsically religious.

In many respects, a successor to Schleiermacher – the American philosopher and psychologist William James – further popularized the concept of religious experience in his famous work, *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Originally composed and presented as twenty lectures on the subject of natural religion for the Gifford Lectures Series at Edinburgh University in 1901-1902, they have had an enduring impact on how religious scholars have come to comprehend religious experience.

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In what he will describe as a psychological perspective on religion, James relies on various literary sources.

If the enquiry be psychological, not religious emotions, but rather religious feelings and religious impulses must be its subject, and I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men in works of piety and autobiography.24

Indeed, James is not concerned with the ordinary religious believer, but rather the religious genius. The religion of the ordinary person is characterized by James as second-hand, basically a matter of convention. On the other hand, religious geniuses are those exceptional individuals who are often the founders of a particular religious tradition. One might note that this move has several resonances with Schleiermacher’s efforts to distinguish the source or essence of religion as religious experience, and that doctrine, dogma, and ritual are secondary or epiphenomenal.

James goes on to note that there may be a correlation between such religious genius and psychological abnormality. Yet, he asserts, religious geniuses are the best subjects for an investigation into the phenomenon of religious experience. James contends that the study of the abnormal (or the exceptional) can provide insight into the normal, or rather, may better reveal the source of the phenomenon.

The focus of James’s study is what he refers to as religious feelings, which are distinct and different from emotion. James also chooses to focus on religion as personal as opposed to religion as a social manifestation. Or, as he will also characterize it, his concern is the individual’s communion with the divine, that which is personal and inward. Religion for James is “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in

24 James, Varieties, 4.
their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.” The divine for James is interpreted broadly as denoting any object that is godlike, whether it is a concrete deity or not. Thus, he includes in his category of religion and the religious Buddhism and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s transcendentalism.

James, however, does reject all forms of fetishism and magic, as well as Stoicism, the latter which he deems simple personal morality. For James, the truly religious person, as in the case of the Christian, is motivated by “the spirit of the universe” to endure life’s trials and tribulations. The stoic/moralist, however, accepts what is because it is. Again, one can see in James’s logic, resonances of Schleiermacher. Both James and Schleiermacher are rejecting the limits to which Kant circumscribed religion, and they are doing so by an appeal to religious experience.

James next goes on to explore the reality of the unseen, noting that the unseen can have an incredible impact on a person, though it is not a matter of perception by one’s ordinary senses. He frames his discourse, once more, in terms of experience – the experience of “something there.” He relates this both to accounts of persons experiencing a presence when alone in a room and to accounts of people having mystical experiences where the divine seems real to them.

Over the next several lectures, James goes on to identify two kinds of attitudes associated with people who have powerful religious experiences: pessimism and optimism, the former being of much greater interest to him. He is particularly intrigued by the Sick Soul, the soul that is aware of sin in his or herself as well as evil in the world.

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25 James, Varieties, 31-32.
26 James, Varieties, 47.
Such individuals often experience profound depression, but it is accompanied by a desire to make sense of things. Such individuals, according to James, are found in the religions of the twice born, the religions that are non-naturalistic and associated with creeds of mysticism, renunciation, and inwardness. These are distinct from the religions of the once born, the religions of the primitive that are coarse, orgiastic, revivalist, and bloody.

It is important to note that for generations of religion scholars who followed James, mysticism becomes almost synonymous with religious experience. For James and his intellectual successors, mysticism is the prototypical religious experience as it is rooted in states of consciousness, and represents something beyond our ordinary perception. Particularly significant for James and others are also the unitive aspects, the sense of being apart or at one with the transcendent. James comes to identify four distinct attributes or characteristics common to mystical experiences: ineffability – the subject of the mystical experience is not capable of describing the experience; noetic – the subject claims to have experienced a revelation or revelations, to have acquired new knowledge through non-rational means, transience – the experience is relatively short lived, and passivity – the subject does not possess control over what transpires as a part of the mystical experience. However, James does note that not all mystical experiences are the same; rather, they may be characterized as representing a continuum with respect to mystical consciousness, from drug-induced states to cosmic consciousness where one is “one with the absolute.”

As in the case of Schleiermacher, there is veracity of feeling and intuition that exceeds that of reason for James. Thus, in his eighteenth lecture, he explores the
relationship between philosophy and personal religious experience. For James, the former is subordinate to the latter.

I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.27 Subsequently, he proffers several examples to show that reason is subordinate to feeling. Indeed, referring to the existence of God, he goes over various philosophical proofs, and contends that they do no more than corroborate pre-existing belief in the matter. Thus, again he maintains that the essence of religion is feeling, not thought.

The emphasis on experience would also be vital in Rudolph Otto's pioneering work The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational.28 Once more, one can see that a principle antagonist in this scenario is Kant, because of the constraints he imposes on knowledge and reason. Thus, in his foreword, Otto proclaims that he has ventured to write “of that which may be called ‘non-rational’ or ‘supra-rational’ in the depths of the divine nature.” He goes on to state that his book is “a serious attempt to analyse exactly the feeling which remains where the concept fails, and to introduce a terminology which is not any more loose or indeterminate for having necessarily to make use of symbols.”29 Otto goes on to say that religion is not exclusively contained and exhaustively comprised in any series of “rational” assertions.

Otto goes on to assert that religion is born in a personal experience of the ‘Numen,’ the ‘sacred,’ or the “the holy.” This experience for Otto is one that he describes

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27 James, Varieties, 422.
as a “unique original feeling-response which can be in itself ethically neutral and claims consideration in its own right.” As was the case with Schleiermacher and James, the ethical aspects as well as the rational schematization of religion as dogma and doctrine comes later. Otto goes on to describe this experience in terms of creature feeling which he defines as “the emotion of a creature, submerged and overwhelmed by its own nothingness in contrast to what is supreme above all creatures.”

Phenomenologically, the numinous is felt as objective and outside the self. As to the nature and modes of manifestation of the sacred, Otto attempts to capture its complexity in the now famous nomenclature, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The sacred has an aspect, the *tremendum*, that is terrifying, that is repulsive or repellent, that is kratophonic and awe-filled. However, as *fascinans*, the sacred draws one to it. It is attractive and compelling.

In the twentieth century, perhaps the most prominent exponent of this tradition was the historian of religions and religious comparativist Mircea Eliade. Considered by many to have inaugurated the modern comparative study of religion as well as playing a most important role in the development of religious studies in the academy, his understanding of religion and religious experience is most prescient.

In 1954, two years before coming to the United States at the prompting of Joachim Wach (director of the History of Religions department at the University of Chicago) to give the Haskell Lectures, and four years before actually assuming the chair

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33 Though this phrase does not actually appear as such in Otto, it has come to be associated with him. It is actually the conflation of two phrases deployed by Otto: the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans*. 
of the History of Religions department at Chicago, Eliade published *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History*. In this work, which Eliade confesses the strong temptation to give the subtitle *Introduction to a Philosophy of History*, he states that it is his intention to examine the fundamental concepts of archaic societies. In so doing, however, the reader is introduced to Eliade’s understanding of the *sacred* which subsequently informs his understanding of religious experience, i.e. the sacred being the objective of religious experience.

Eliade maintains that archaic ontologies, or rather, the conceptions of being and reality associated with archaic or “primitive” human beings, are given in their myths, rituals, and rites. Further, it is his contention that through a concerted effort of discerning and interpretation – the task of the historian of religions – a certain metaphysical position is presented. Indeed, though not couched in the words associated with philosophy, some *thing* is revealed.\(^{34}\)

Eliade goes on to assert that for the archaic or primitive man, objects and actions are only real to the extent that they participate in a transcendent reality. For example, Eliade states

> Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred – and hence instantly becomes saturated with being – because it constitutes a hierophany... The object appears as the receptacle of an exterior force that differentiates it from its milieu and gives it meaning and value. This force may reside in the substance of the object or in its form.\(^{35}\)

For Eliade, a hierophany is the breakthrough of the sacred into human experience, i.e. a revelation. Such appearances or eruptions of the sacred define spatial and temporal

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\(^{35}\) Eliade, 4.
reality. The human beings capacity to apprehend such events leads Eliade to characterize them as *homo religiosus*. Indeed, for Eliade, there is the real sense that human beings do not construct their world so much as they discover, recognize, and orient themselves in relation to the sacred, the real, and the transcendent.\(^{36}\)

As stated earlier, such understandings are held and conveyed in terms of myths, rituals, and symbols. The sacred is associated with primordial reality that is allied with the gods, ancestors, or heroes of archaic peoples. Eliade ascribes to these deities and divines the nomenclature of archetypes. It is these beings who are held to have ordered the world. Human time and space, if they are to be meaningful, must reflect and be oriented in relation to the given. Conformity to archetypes is what constitutes being and the real.

The outstanding reality is the sacred; for only the sacred is in an absolute fashion, acts effectively, creates things and makes them endure. The innumerable gestures of consecration — of tracts and territories, of objects, of men, etc. — reveal the primitive’s obsession with the real, his thirst for being.\(^{37}\)

In terms of the spatial or territoriality, Eliade emphasizes the concept of the center. He asserts that the center is the preeminent zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality, and the *axis mundi*, the place where heaven and earth meet. Sacred places such as mountains, temples, even communities and homes are oriented in terms of the sacred center.

With respect to time, Eliade characterizes archaic and primitive societies in many respects as atemporal. The sacred coincides with the mythical time of the beginning (*in illo tempore, ab origine*). Rituals and rites are understood to connect and return one to the

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beginning. This is clearly seen for Eliade in myths of eternal return and myths of the Golden Age. It is also reflected in the sacralility of various periods and seasons. Again, the human's way of being in the world is legitimized through adherence to and replication of an extrahuman model. For example, the sacrifice performed at the building of the house is simply the imitation, on the human plane, of the sacrifice performed in illo tempore to give birth to the world.

According to Eliade, that which opposes the sacred is the profane, defined as all that has no mythical meaning, which lacks exemplary models, and in some sense, lacks reality. It is for this reason, notes Eliade, that archaic peoples set themselves in opposition, by every means in their power, to the idea of history as a succession of events that are irreversible, unforeseeable, possessed of autonomous value. To be a part of history is not to follow the exemplary model; it is to enter the realm of the profane, of chaos, of despair, amor fati, and pessimism.

Critics of the Tradition

Over the course of the last several decades, there has been a growing body of scholarship that has come to challenge the classical interpretation of religious experience articulated above, the tradition that stretches from Schleiermacher to Eliade. Of particular concern is the assertion that these experiences can be characterized as immediate perceptions of "something" and that this something is universally and unambiguously identified as the sacred, the numinous, the holy, or the infinite. One example of some note is the work of Steven T. Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*. Another, and for the purpose of my project perhaps the most influential is Wayne Proudfoot and his

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seminal text *Religious Experience*. In this work, Proudfoot deconstructs one of the central tenets of the classical tradition, namely the notion of unmediated experiences.

Beginning with Schleiermacher, Proudfoot notes that his methodology has had a profound impact on modern religious thought (theology, philosophy of religion, the history of religions), an impact/influence that persists to this day. Even those scholars who reject his construction of religion as autonomous and associated with a sense/intuition of the infinite or as a feeling of absolute dependence utilize similar arguments to defend “the irreducible character of religious experience construed as the experience of the sacred, or as limit experience, or of religious language, practice, or doctrine.”

According to Proudfoot, Schleiermacher was the earliest and most systematic proponent of the autonomy of religious experience. Schleiermacher contributes to the tradition in which religious experience is understood primarily as affective experience and is differentiated from both intellect and will, the tradition that is carried forward in the work of William James and Rudolf Otto.

Indeed, according to Proudfoot, Schleiermacher wants to distinguish religion as a third autonomous region of human experience – different from science and morality. In this sense, I would assert that Schleiermacher presages Mircea Eliade’s attribution of the human being as *homo religiosus*.

Piety, does indeed, linger with satisfaction on every action that is from God, and every activity that reveals the Infinite in the finite, and yet it is not itself this activity. Only by keeping quite outside the range both of science and of practice can it maintain its proper sphere and character. Only when piety takes its place alongside of science and practice, as a

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40 Proudfoot, 7.
necessary, an indispensable third, as their natural counterpart, not less in
worth and in splendour than either, will the common field be altogether
occupied and human nature on this side complete.  

Proudfoot notes, however, that Schleiermacher's understanding of the nature of
religious experience as independent, has come under serious scrutiny by philosophers and
psychologists who have shown that the extent to which one ascribes emotions as well as
identifying one's own mental or bodily state is dependent on "a complex set of beliefs
and grammatical rules." In other words, moments of experience are dependent on
particular concepts, beliefs, practices, and grammar (language). Informed here
particularly by the philosophical tradition of Wittgenstein, Proudfoot is effectively
arguing that all experiences are mediated, that we do not come to any experience as
*tabula rasa*, that we are always already situated historically, culturally, socially, and that
this shapes all of our experiences. There is no such thing as a raw or pure experience.

This critique directly addresses what I refer to earlier as the epistemological issue
with respect to the phenomenon of religious experience. How does one know what he/she
knows? What actually transpires in the event of perception of the sacred, in the
experience of the religious? I note that the epistemological issue pertaining to human
experience is also a concern in the continental philosophical tradition and is eloquently
expressed in the work of Martin Heidegger. In his monumental work, *Being and Time*,
Heidegger states that one of the existential/essential structures of *Dasein* (human
beingness) is thrownness. *Dasein* finds itself already in a world. It is always already
enmeshed in a history, a culture, engaged in practices, pursuing projects. There is no
pure, unmediated experience.

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Proudfoot notes that this failing of Schleiermacher’s program is not due to naivete but rather on the confusion and ambiguity of descriptive analysis and explanatory commitments with respect to religious experience. The insistence on describing religious experience from the subject’s point of view, the stress on the reality of the intentional object of an experience for the person who has the experience (the veridical issue to which I shall return to again later), the avoidance of reductionism, and the distinction between descriptive and explanatory tasks are all critical for the study of religion.  

Again, insistence on immediacy of religious experience may be descriptively accurate, but not theoretically (explanatorily) inaccurate. From the perspective of the subject, the experience appears to be immediate and noninferential, but it is dependent on the availability of particular concepts, beliefs, and practices. Unfortunately, “[t]his confusion between the phenomenological and theoretical senses of immediate is central to Schleiermacher’s program.”

This is not to say that there is not much to commend in Schleiermacher’s analysis of religious experience. For example, Schleiermacher’s theory of religious experience is amenable to polytheistic, pantheistic, as well as non-theistic perspectives or at least is open to an understanding of ultimate reality that is heterogeneous and variegated. Further, in the description of religious experience, Schleiermacher’s language is extremely evocative, embracing a range of human experience from joy to sorrow, ecstasy and suffering, freedom and constraint. Indeed, Tillich observes that Schleiermacher captures even the erotic dimension of religious experience.

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43 Proudfoot, Religious Experience, xvi.
44 Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 3.
45 Paul Tillich, A History of Christian Thought (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 378. “It is the creative eros in which the emotional and cognitive elements are united in the intuition of the infinite in the finite.”
Moreover, from Schleiermacher, one is introduced to the notion that religious statements are neither propositional truth nor do they represent some ultimate transcendent norm. Rather they are relative and particular. This means there is no generic form of religion and each form religion takes needs to be understood in its historical, social, cultural, and geographical contexts.46

Schleiermacher’s failure, as mentioned earlier, is his commitment to unmediated experience. This has been challenged, in my opinion successfully. There is no such thing as an unmediated experience, at least in the sense that Schleiermacher sought. We bring to all experience a metanarrative through which we encounter and interpret the world. We then come to understanding or making meaning in relation to this narrative.

Proudfoot asserts that the move to experience as witness in the likes of Schleiermacher, James, Otto, and Eliade, was an attempt to protect and provide a defense for religion as such a significant aspect of human beingness against various forms scientific and philosophical critique, and to secure religion’s claim to being sui generis.47 Yet, I hold with Proudfoot, that explanatory reduction is unavoidable with respect to religious experience, even among adherents and participants. Proudfoot shows that the very language used to describe such experiences is predicated on preexisting concepts such as “the infinite” or “absolute dependence.” To the extent that they are not, one can say that the nomenclature is empty, meaningless, serving as a little more than a placeholder.

However, Proudfoot does make what I find to be an important distinction between explanatory reduction and descriptive reduction. According to Proudfoot,

Descriptive reduction is the failure to identify an emotion, practice, or experience under the description by which the subject identifies it. This is indeed unacceptable. To describe an experience in nonreligious terms when the subject himself [sic] describes it in religious terms is to misidentify the experience or to attend to another experience altogether. . . . To describe the experience of a mystic by reference only to alpha waves, altered heart rate, and changes in bodily temperature is to misdescribe it. To characterize the experience of a Hindu mystic in terms drawn from the Christian tradition is to misidentify it. In each of these instances, the subject's identifying experience has been reduced to something other than that experienced by the subject.  

Conversely,

Explanatory reduction consists in offering an explanation of an experience in terms that are not those of the subject and that might not meet with his [or her] approval. This is perfectly justifiable and is, in fact, normal procedure. The explanandum is set in a new context, whether that be one of covering laws and initial conditions, narrative structure, or some other explanatory model. The terms of the explanation need not be familiar or acceptable to the subject. Historians offer explanations of past events by employing such concepts as socialization, ideology, means of production, and feudal economy. Seldom can these concepts properly be ascribed to the people whose behavior is the object of the historian's study. But that poses no problem. The explanation stands or falls according to how well it can account for all the available evidence.  

In other words, in investigating religious experience, how an event or phenomenon appears to the participant must be taken seriously, thereby avoiding descriptive reduction. On the other hand, the scholar/investigator is free to give her/his own explanation with respect to the phenomenon or event in question.  

48 Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 196-197.  
49 Proudfoot, Religious Experience, 197.  
50 Proudfoot is careful to state that the investigating party need not be restricted to the language of the participant in the giving of a description of what transpires. However, in some respect an exceptional
This I see as an appropriate via media with respect to the analysis of this complex category of experience. Human beingness as well as religion is always fundamentally social and historically and culturally situated, and this must be taken into consideration in the analysis of experience just as other critical tools from history, sociology, anthropology, and literature, have been useful analyzing, interpreting, and explaining this religion.

Substantive Understanding vs. Functionalist Explanation

It is interesting to note that the failings pointed out by Proudfoot are particular associated with what might be referred to as a strictly substantive understanding of religion as opposed to functional explanatory theories of religion. As articulated by Daniel L. Pals, in his classic text, Seven Theories of Religion,\textsuperscript{51} theories that tend to explain religion intellectually, in terms of ideas that motivate, move, and inspire people are substantive. In such theories, religion is understood in terms of the conceptual content, or ideas to which persons profess allegiance. “People are religious...because certain ideas strike them as true and valuable.”\textsuperscript{52} Religions are accepted by people; “they are about things that ‘have meaning’ to human selves.”\textsuperscript{53} Thus, interpretations taking into account human intent/volition provide the best understanding of the phenomenon. Explanatory approaches are deemed inappropriate because they appeal to seemingly impersonal processes rather than human purpose, volition, or consciousness.

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\textsuperscript{52} Pals, 13.
\textsuperscript{53} Pals, 13.
Conversely, functional theories involve explanatory approaches to understanding human phenomena. Indeed, theorists in this tradition would assert that their methodologies are able to “look beneath and behind the conscious thoughts of religious people to find something deeper and hidden.” Theorists that fall within this category are those who look at social structures and/or psychological factors that they contend are the underpinnings of religious behavior.

In the field of religious studies, substantive theories are associated with names such as Schleiermacher, James, Otto, and Eliade. Among African American religionists, who are the focus of Chapter 2, the designation of substantive theorist would apply to both a theologian like James H. Cone, as well as a historian of religion like Charles H. Long. As I have begun to demonstrate, however, such theories are fraught with numerous pitfalls whether one is making claims about some transcendent Other or human consciousness.

With respect to the functionalist approaches, it has been most closely associated with social scientist such as Emile Durkheim but is also applicable to a scholar such as Sigmund Freud. In the case of Durkheim, religion is understood as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden, which unite all those who adhere to them into a moral community called a “church.” Durkheim referred to the mood associated with the attendant feeling of belonging as effervescence. On the other hand, Freud characterized religion as the universal, obsessional neurosis of humankind - the fulfillment of the oldest, strongest, and most urgent of humanity's wishes. Perhaps two of the classic examples that are

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54 Pals, Seven Theories of Religion, 244.
associated with functionalism, however, are the approaches to the study of religion and religious experience of Karl Marx and Georges Bataille.

Marx comes from the tradition of the left Hegelians, such as Feuerbach and is particularly interested in the development of concepts such as alienation. As a hermeneut, Marx makes several moves that will separate him from Schleiermacher. First, he is a dialectical materialist, which means that he makes a turn to the social and the economic instead of consciousness. Whereas Hegel talked about alienation of Geist, and Feuerbach talked about alienation of species consciousness, Marx talks about how people are alienated from their labor. This is the primary social phenomenon for him, where a matter like religion is epiphenomenal, and a component of the social superstructure. Thus for Marx, religion and religious experience are effects or manifestations of other social forces.

When Marx looks at how religion functions in society, he categorizes it as an ideology, one which often legitimizes the status quo. In addition, Marx famously characterizes religion as the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the spirit of a spiritless condition. It is “the opium of the people (des Volkes).” In other words, it often fulfills the role of a palliative. It can make life bearable, but, for Marx, this is a negative, because the masses do not challenge the system of oppression. As an experience then, it is the experience that perpetuates social and economic alienation.

In Theory of Religion, written in 1948 but first published in 1973, Georges Bataille defines the essence of religion as the search for lost intimacy. This impulse, this quest to “return to intimacy” is associated with a desire to (re)establish “immanence
between man and the world, between subject and object.” With the development of a capacity to make distinctions, human beings perceive a discontinuity between themselves and some other, some thing. Thus, asserts Bataille the world of animality is now forever closed to human beings. Yet, it grasps them with “all the fascination of the sacred world, as against the poverty of the profane.” Simultaneously, humans also oppose the “opaque aggregate” of the sacred, preferring instead a “clear world” of things.

Thus for Bataille, the sacred is associated with immanence and intimacy for which there is kind of nostalgia for human beings, as well as the undifferentiated, and chaotic which elicits dread. Reminiscent of Otto’s *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, there is that about the sacred for Bataille that both attracts and repels. Notes Bataille, …man feels a kind of impotent horror in the sense of the sacred. This horror is ambiguous. Undoubtedly, what is sacred attracts and possess an incomparable value, but at the same time, it appears vertiginously dangerous for that clear and profane world where mankind situates its privileged domain.

Bataille goes on to assert that there is a general economy structured around the human beings attempt to regain this lost intimacy. It is in this context that Bataille explores the function of sacrifice, festival, carnival, and potlatch. According to Bataille, such rituals are associated with the consumption or waste of that which has use value. In such free, excessive, even violent and destructive acts, archaic humans attempted to transcend the profane realm, to cross over from the order of things to the intimate order. As noted by Jill Robbins, it is helpful here to place Bataille in the context of his reading of Hegel, especially as it came to him through the lectures of Alexandre Kojève, which

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56 Bataille, 35.
57 Bataille, 36.
interpreted Hegel’s concept of negativity as a “passage through death.” Such transcendence, notes Bataille, is provisional and inconclusive.

With the rise of the military order, and the move toward empire, Bataille maintains that there is a change in consciousness that brings about a “profound alteration in the representation of the world” in dualism. Reflective thought, notes Bataille, creates moral rules that insure the order of things. It thus opposes destruction and useless consumption. This necessitates a “shifting of the borders of the sacred and the profane. Whereas the sacred realm of the intimate order possessed both beneficent/pure elements as well as malefic/impure elements [as sacer which has the connotation of soiled as well as holy], both distant from the profane; the malefic becomes associated with the profane. It is here that Bataille introduces the notion of a secondary transcendence that involves the breaking away from the sensuous world.

As a theory of religion, Bataille’s is explanatory. In this, it bears much in common with Marx, as one would expect of a theory predicated on a general economy. Further, there are clearly structuralist influences present in Bataille that might trace to the inspiration of Marcel Mauss on his thought. Such structuralism places Bataille in opposition to the “phenomenological” tradition’s trust in the evidence of consciousness; e.g., Schleiermacher, Otto, James, and Eliade. Indeed, with structuralists such as Louis Althusser and Claude Levi-Strauss, I would contend that Bataille holds to the position that invariant unconscious structures underlie human experience.

Thus, the sacred is not a thing for Bataille, i.e., there is no there there for Bataille. With Bataille, one is clearly not dealing with the Kant’s noumenon, the thing-in-itself, or

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58 Taylor, Critical Terms for Religious Studies, 290.
being as such. Nor is one dealing with Schleiermacher’s ‘Whence’ or Otto’s ‘sacred’ or ‘holy.’ Rather, for Bataille, the sacred is an ‘artifact’ of how human beings construct meaning in their encounter with the world.

It is important at this juncture, however, for me to note that the schematization of substantive interpretation and functional explanation is by no means absolute. As a system of categorization, its impact is not ubiquitous across disciplines that engage in the study of religion and religious experience. Indeed, while there continues to often be a sharp line of demarcation between the two in the field of religious studies and theology, the same is not the case for anthropologists and sociologists of religion.

For example, one of the fore parents of the social sciences, Max Weber, is often characterized by those in the field of religious studies as the quintessential functionalists. However, this is not consistent with how Weber himself saw his own work. In reality, in his study of the role of religion in sweeping social and cultural transformation, Weber often dealt with conceptual issues in addition to social practices.60 The same is certainly the case of one of the greatest sociologists of religion in the twentieth century, Clifford Geertz. Geertz’s is well-known for his assertion of religion as

a system of symbols that act to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men [sic] ... by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and ... clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that ... the mood and motivations seem uniquely realistic.61

Indeed, one of the most troubling aspects of the study of religious experience within the field of religious studies has been what I feel to be a premature dismissal of what other methodological approaches from the social sciences. Indeed, in many respects, religious studies remains mired in a debate between humanities and social sciences as the proper domain for the study of religion.

It was Wilhelm Dilthey who was the first to assert or attempt to describe the different ways and approaches to investigation of the so-called *Geisteswissenschaften*, the human sciences, over against the *Naturwissenschaften* or the natural sciences. It was his contention that the former differed from the latter in that they were engaged in interpretation while the latter was to be concerned with explanation. In the German, the distinction is often characterized as the distinction between *Verstehen* (understanding obtained through the tools of interpretation such as hermeneutics to arrive at meaning) and *Erklärung* (explanation obtained through the functional analysis).

However, utilizing the work of Proudfoot, I believe it is the case that apparent that “explanation” is unavoidable whether one purports to be a substantivist or functionalist. Moreover, the social sciences need not be viewed as anymore reductionist than the humanities. Thus, it is my contention that the best in the sense of being the most comprehensive as well as compelling theories of religious experience, must take into consideration the material conditions and social forces that impinge upon one’s community of concern, i.e., functional theories of religion.

In looking at various theories of religious experience, it is also the case that very few deal with the concept of the body. Again, perhaps owing to a tradition that is enmeshed in idealism of spirit, mind, and consciousness, and thus more comfortable with
concepts and questions of perception, the role of the body in terms of religious experience has been overlooked.

One exception of note is the work of Paula Cooey and her important work entitled, *Religious Imagination and the Body: A Feminist Analysis.* Paula Cooey defines religion functionally as a reciprocating artifact of human culture that is a product of human imagination that in turn shapes future ways of imagining. She notes that religious adherents attribute extra-cultural or supernatural origin, power, and reality to the central symbols governing religious systems. This introduces the substantive element into an otherwise functional definition. The introduction of transcendence associated with religious symbol systems distinguishes them from other such systems that are studied by other disciplines. Yet, religious systems are thoroughly embedded in the cultures in which they are located.

It is here that Cooey introduces turns to the body and the role it plays as object of and vehicle for the social construction of reality. Indeed, the more one studies the role of the body, the clearer the inseparability of knowledge, value, and power becomes.

This inseparability makes inescapable the perspectival character of all claims to knowledge; it intimately links knower and known to the particular historical, material context in which the knowing relation occurs.

Relying on the work of various sociologists of knowledge, particularly Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain,* Cooey defines the body as a social construct that provides the framework for the way we experience the world.

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63 Cooey, 5.
Thus,

Any claims to a knowledge gained directly through sentience or experience in ways that circumvent culture or society arise from misunderstanding not only the inseparability of our experience from the social context in which it occurs, but also the dominance of social or cultural symbol in the relation between experience and historical context.  

She goes on to note how scholars as well as adherents wrestle with the issue of the epistemological authority of the body as it relates to religious experience, particularly religious feeling. Cooey shows the role of religion in mapping the relationship between the body as a “site” (location or medium for the production of knowledge) and “sign” (culturally generated artifact). Mapping here is understood as “a metaphor for a highly pluri-vocal and reciprocal social process in which individual persons participate. The process is furthermore multidirectional and includes potential and actual resistance at all levels as one of its features.” I will make reference again to Cooey later in my characterization of African American religious experience as oppositional practice.

Justification

In the wake of the critique of the classical traditions understanding of religious experience, one would think that both the epistemological issue as well as the veridical issue would be essentially moot, at least with respect to philosophy of religion. However, there has been resurgence in the study of religious experience from a somewhat

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64 Cooey, 6. Also see Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. It is perhaps for this reason that though inspired by Charles Long’s work in *Signification*, Anthony Pinn spends so much time in his recent monograph, *Terror and Triumph*, talking about how black bodies are rendered socially and physically through various rituals of reference. Pinn is also intentionally interdisciplinary, proffering “relational centralism” that makes us of insights gathered from psychology of religion’s work on conversion, the history of religions, and art criticism associated with abstract and expressionism and pop art. Again, it would seem to me difficult to adequately deal with religion and religious experience in general, and African American religion and religious experience in particular without taking the body seriously.

65 Cooey, 119.
surprising area, namely analytical philosophy. Over the last decade, there have been a number of books written by analytic philosophers that look at religious experience as evidence for the existence of God. These works include: William Alston’s *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, Richard Swinburne’s *Is There a God?* and *The Existence of God*, Caroline Franks Davis’s *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, Keith E. Yandell’s *The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, and Jerome Gellman’s *Experience of God and the Rationality of Theistic Belief*.

As noted by William P. Alston, philosophy of religion as well as philosophy of the mind is interested in religious experience as a possible source of knowledge of the existence, nature and doings of God. While the experiences in question seem to their possessors to be direct, perceptual awareness of God, they may be wrong. Indeed, many philosophers would hold that such is the case. According to Alston, many philosophers judge such experiences with great skepticism, asserting that no one has a “veridical experience of the presence and/or activity of God.” Alston notes, however, that within philosophical convention, such experiences may be deemed veridical following the principle that any apparent experience of something is to be regarded as veridical unless one has sufficient reasons to the contrary. Alston comments, “If we do not accept that

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principle, we will never have sufficient grounds for taking any experience to be veridical – religious, sensory or whatever.”

Conversely, critics of this perspective contend that one does not have the same capacity for intersubjective checks of religious experiences that obtain with sense perceptions. To such an assertion, however, Alston challenges the supposition that sense perception represents the only way in which we can achieve genuine cognitive contact with objective reality. Other scholars assert that religious experience can be adequately explained by psychological and social factors, without bringing God into the picture. Again, Alston challenges the supposition by positing, “even if this-worldly factors are the only immediate causes of the experience, God could figure as a cause farther back in the causal chain.” Finally, there are those who maintain that inconsistencies and/or contradictions between alleged experiences of God provide sufficient reason for doubting the “object” of religious experience. Yet, again, Alston raises the possibility that any number of people may well be experiencing a common reality, though they disagree in their characterization of their experience. Indeed, Alston notes that such is not an uncommon occurrence in the realm of sense perception.

One of the most eloquent responses to the contemporary challenge to coming from analytic philosophers and philosophers of mind is that of Matthew Bagger. A student of Wayne Proudfoot, in his work, Religious Experience, Justification, and History, Bagger deals with religious experience in terms of its relation to explanation

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but also the validity of its use with respect to providing information about God or the sacred, and the justification of belief there in. Bagger is particularly interested in the use of extraordinary experiences; which goes back to Schleiermacher, James, Otto, and Eliade; being appropriated by contemporary scholars to defend theistic beliefs. As in the case with Proudfoot, Bagger notes that there is a difference between phenomenological immediacy and epistemic immediacy.\(^{74}\)

Bagger’s refutation regarding the use of religious experiences as rationally justifying religious beliefs is predicated on what he maintains is the proper understanding of experience and justification. As one would suspect, from a student of Proudfoot, the issue at least in part is associated again with perception and explanation. Moreover, Bagger goes on to add the issue of historical context as something that is ignored in the newer philosophical approaches to religious experience.

As in the case of his mentor, Bagger maintains that much of the newer scholarship seems to be of an apologetic character, and subsequently there is once more that marginalization of explanation (explanatory reduction). Bagger asserts this scholarship evinces the view that attending to explanatory element in religious phenomena provides a window of opportunity to unsympathetic characterizations of religion or the religious.

Bagger also contends that the analytical style of the afore mentioned scholarship in part explains the absence and lack of attention give to historical, linguistic, and cultural context. Bagger makes an important claim and commitment to historicism. Though cognizant that this term is fraught with difficulty and is often quite misunderstood due to the various ways in which it is deployed, Bagger’s understanding is similar to that of

\(^{74}\) Bagger, *Religious Experience*, 10.
Jeffrey Stout, namely “the rationality of a given person’s beliefs or actions is relative to the reasons or reasoning available to the person. And the availability of reasons and reasoning varies with historical and social context.”

Indeed, Bagger maintains that explanation is the paramount factor in both the production of experience and the justification of beliefs. Explanation is fundamental to the epistemic character of an era. Thus, Bagger argues that while religious experience might have justified religious beliefs in the past, this cannot obtain in the modern or postmodern context. It is the case, however, that this may contradict a culture or communities expressed commitments and values. Nevertheless, he proffers, “The implicit religious explanation of religious experience no longer represents the best explanation of the event experience religiously.” While it may be the case that supernatural explanations may be acceptable in some context or setting, it is certainly not to be the case in all.

What is more, Bagger goes on to make the claim that the supernatural has become explanatorily otiose. In other words, as a category, it has no legitimate application as an explanation of particular events within the mundane order, within the world of the everyday. He therefore views its recent reappearance among philosophers of religion as at best intellectual laziness, and at worse, cowardice. Invoking Charles Pierce’s “integrity of belief is more wholesome than any particular belief one might give up”, Bagger holds that we should not seek to protect one subset of our beliefs and values from others.

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77 Bagger, *Religious Experience*, 16.
With respect to use of religious experience as justification for the existence of some transcendent, supernatural, reality or entity, I am in agreement with Bagger. Thus, for the purpose of this study, the veridical nature of religious experience will not be a matter of examination or dispute. With respect to the objective of this study, religious experience is inclusive of all events which I refer to as primordial experiences of reality, or that which is deemed to be "the real" or "true." It is also for this reason that this project is not theological in any of conventional sense of the word. By this I mean that methodologically, I am adopting agnostic position with respect to the profession of attributes of the real or the sacred. Indeed, it is my contention that real is opaque. One may study religious dogma, doctrine, symbols, or ritual, but no matter how they are represented, construed, and interpreted, one cannot fully grasp or apprehend them. In this sense, as mentioned earlier, the sacred or the real is excessive, full, abundant, highly charged, and power-full.

Faith vs. Religious Experience

A term which is somewhat related to the concept of religious experience is that of faith. Unfortunately, it is a concept that in many respects is just as complex and varied in definition. John Hicks, in *Faith and Knowledge*, states the study of the nature of faith refers to study of the "epistemological character of man’s cognition or delusion, apprehension or misapprehension of God." In this sense, faith is used to represent the manner and structure of a person’s supposed awareness of the ultimate reality, the infinite, the divine, or "God."78

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Important in Hick’s articulation of the nature of faith is that he once more introduces the concept of experience. As such, his query, as well as the orientation of I adopt in my own line of argumentation, is one distinct from and relatively independent of the ontological question about the existence of God. In this sense, it is a phenomenological discourse. Whether or not there exists a God, a great portion of humanity report having experienced and/or encountered “God.” Thus, while for the theist, inquiry into the nature of faith may fall within the classic articulation *fides quaerens intellectum*, Hick notes that this inquiry is possible whatever the disposition (agnostic, atheist, or humanist) of the scholar involved.\(^7\)

According to Hicks, faith is employed both as an epistemological and nonepistemological expression. Hick notes that the words *fides* and *fiducia* “provide conveniently self-explanatory labels for the two uses.\(^8\) Further, Hick asserts that as he articulates it, this phenomenon obtains for theists and nontheists alike.

While the term faith has its proponents, for the purpose of my discourse and in keeping with the convention in the field, I will retain the use of the term religious experience. However, given the observations and insights gained in the discourse thus far, I proffer the following definition: *religious experience is best defined as any experience (understood as an event that one lives through either as a participant or an observer and about which one is conscious or aware) in which what is experienced by the person is taken to be an encounter with the “real” or “true.” Depending on one’s*

\(^7\)Hick, *Faith and Knowledge*, x.

\(^8\)Hick derives this particular association from Martin Buber in *Two Types of Faith*, trans. by N.P. Goldhawk (London, 1951), which uses the Greek *pistis* and the Hebrew *emunah* to indicate historical sources of these two uses of “faith.”
tradition, this is may be referred to as God (a representative of God, or other theophanies), Nature, the Ground, the Ultimate, the Infinite, or the self.  

Summary

In this chapter, as the title would suggest, it has been my intent to provide an overview of the religious experience as it has come to be understood in religious studies. In so doing, I have raised two important issues which I have referred to as the epistemological issue and the veridical issue that have to a great extent formed and informed the discourse around the phenomenon of religious experience. I subsequently rehearsed the development of what I refer to as the classic tradition’s understanding of religious experience through the major historical figures of Schleiermacher, James, Otto, and Eliade as well as making reference to what I characterized as a contemporary resurgence of interest in religious experience from an unlikely quarter, namely analytic philosophy.

I then offered a critique of the classic tradition as well as the contemporary variation, utilizing the work of Proudfoot and Bagger. I also attempted to address the specter of “reductionism” raised by Proudfoot, but whose roots go back further to the distinction made between the humanities and the social sciences. In particular, I called attention to the supposed sharp line of demarcation between the substantive interpretive form of inquire and investigation and the functional explanative form of analysis. Once more, a careful examination of not only the history of the supposed dispute reveals that to a great extent no such schism is held universally to exist, moreover, I would contend that

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81 This is a definition of religious experience inspired by that of Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1991), 14.
a more robust and comprehensive understanding of religious experience comes by utilizing the theoretical and methodological insights associated with both approaches. The benefit of such an orientation is evinced in the work of Paula Cooey. Finally, after a quick reference to the term faith, I presented my definition of religious experience, the definition that will be the referent for all subsequent discussion on religious experience to follow.

Further, the principle function of this chapter is as groundwork for the discourse ahead. While much more will be said in subsequent chapters with respect to the questions of theory and methodology, the trajectory of this project, namely the development of a postmodern 'theory' of African American religious experience must be framed with respect to the larger tradition. For example, as I mentioned in the section of this chapter dealing with substantive interpretation as opposed to functional explanation, the dominant orientation among African American religionist who have reflected on religious experience has been informed by the former, and therefore suffer from many if not all the failings pointed out above. Conversely, my approach is fundamentally interdisciplinary and heterological. Indeed, counter to most of my predecessors in African American religious studies, a majority of my analysis is indebted to functionalist theories and methodologies associated with the social sciences, while also deploying tools associated with humanistic approaches (interpretive, hermeneutical), and philosophical reasoning.

As mentioned in the introduction my research is guided by a continental tradition associated with names such as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot, George Perec, Theodore Adorno, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de
Certeau. For the most part, these schematizations are closely identified with various
intellectual and scholarly trajectories; e.g., the phenomenological tradition, the Marxist
and Critical Theory tradition, and the structuralist/postmodern tradition. Yet, there are
marked differences even in the work of these scholars. For example, Pierre Bourdieu is
rightly characterized as a strict functionalist. As shall be seen in Chapter 5, he is
cconcerned only with actions and practices of society. On the other hand, while in many
respects a functionalist, de Certeau does bring a humanistic sensibility in his analysis of
language and speech as they relate to matters of space and place, strategies and tactics.

Having laid the foundation, we now move on to examine contemporary
approaches to the study of African American religious experience in Chapter 2.
Chapter 2 – Examples of African American Religious Experience

We have bricolage and nothing else, and we think we can even invent ourselves at random by assembling convenient and pleasing but transient identities out of the bits and pieces we find around us. We pick up fragments to shore against our ruin.\(^{82}\)

Blacks are reluctant philosophers.\(^{83}\)

Introduction

In Chapter 2, it is my intention to present several examples of African American religious experience. These examples will constitute the data upon which the theories and methodologies under consideration will be brought to bear in the following chapter. Thus far, I have discussed the history of the concept of religious experience, and stipulated a working definition that has and will be applied throughout this thesis. From there, I offered a survey of how the phenomenon of religious experience has been addressed by differing disciplinary approaches among scholars of African American religion; e.g. theology, philosophy, ethics, history of religions/comparative religion, sociology, history, and biblical studies. In so doing, I noted the strengths as well as the weaknesses associated with each of these traditions and the need for new theoretical and methodological tools that grasp the phenomenon of African American religious experience in a much fuller and compelling fashion, which I define as possessing more explanatory power.\(^{84}\)

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84 The concept of explanatory power has been presented in the introduction, and it will be referenced again in the conclusion. The concept is taken from Alistair Mcintyre in his seminal work, *After Virtue*. Mcintyre argues that the particular narrative between any two or more that can explain how the competing narrative arrived at its particular set of claims has greater explanatory power. It is my contention in this thesis, that theories rooted in the everyday can and do provide a more robust explanation of African American religious experience than those currently being deployed among most African American religious scholars.
The method chosen to present the examples shall be that of *phenomenological descriptions*. While the term has been used in Chapter 1 in association with religious studies, I intend in this chapter to use the term in a more restrictive fashion, in keeping with its use in philosophy. As Diogenes Allen notes in *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*\(^5\), frequently the word phenomenology is associated with a study that claims to be purely descriptive, without the issue of truth or falsity being raised. While such circumstances do obtain for the case studies I wish to present, as a description of the method itself it is insufficient. Phenomenology as a discipline attempts to encounter pure phenomena. Again, Allen is helpful in stating that pure phenomena are not to be equated with sense impressions or one’s stream of consciousness. Phenomenology maintains that by considering objects, by which is meant the contents of awareness (it is in this sense that phenomenologist use the term object and objective), that one can “intuit the essences and grasp *essential* connections between those essences.”\(^6\) Thus, while phenomenology looks at the same things as other disciplines, it asserts that it is able to encounter the world of experience as it reveals itself, in its givenness. The various subtleties of this approach will be addressed in the next section before they are applied to the three cases presented for consideration.

**Encountering Phenomenology Again for the First Time**

In Chapter 1, I introduced the phenomenological method in my efforts to offer a description of religious experience. Phenomenology is the study of human experience and

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of the way things present themselves to us in and through such experience. Stated slightly differently, phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning. Phenomenology then deals with the conditions for the possibility of meaning.

Subsequently, phenomenological description, with its emphasis on recording the phenomenal constitution of objectivities in consciousness, has been a persuasive model for historians, sociologists and cultural historians wishing to investigate the experience of historical, social, and cultural processes, and the meanings conferred on them by the historical, social, and cultural actors who produce them, and are produced by them.

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87 Given some of the exclusive claims on reason in the West, it has been difficult to see the rationality of non-Western peoples. Conversely, it has also made problematic the status of theory in Africana scholarship. I think that part of this is that theory is assumed to be intrinsically or innately Western and thus other than the experience of African/Africana people. As Paget Henry notes in his essay “Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications,” in Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise (Durham, NC: Duke University, Fall 2006), “Some Africana scholars have associated theory and rational linear thought with white males (1).” This is a problem, or rather a mindset, which I believe to be common among a significant number of African American religion scholars. Similarly, Peter J. Paris notes in The Spirituality of African People: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995) by way of moral challenges to scholarship from historically marginalized communities in the 1960’s and 1970’s, these voices “tended to be disinterested in the traditions of speculative thought as such and, accordingly, they shunned many of the major metaphysical impulses of the Enlightenment project and especially the latter’s stress on the autonomy of human reason as the foundation of all reality.” Paris goes on to say, “while not totally abandoning ... they were interested in the political significance of such ideas for human freedom and social order (3-4).”

Whereas the original objectives of phenomenological description are totalizing and systematic, over the last several decades, a challenge to such assumptions have been raised by various non-European scholars as well as other intellectuals who have been critical of the universal/normative claims that arose during the Enlightenment and have become part of the nomos of modernity. Many of these individuals have become advocates of phenomenological approaches that are culturally conditioned, i.e. that take cultural particularities and distinctiveness into consideration.89

As a discursive practice, phenomenology attempts to grasp the constituting activities of consciousness through the act of bracketing the natural attitude, by which is meant the focus one has when he/she is involved or ordinarily engaged in the world, i.e., intending things, facts, projects, situations, etc. The natural attitude might therefore, be described as the default human way of being in the world. It is for the most part, the

89 There are a myriad of examples with respect to the use of phenomenology in the various fields and disciplines that I note above. Phenomenology as a discipline has been central to the tradition of continental European philosophy throughout the twentieth century, while philosophy of mind has evolved in the Austro-Anglo-American tradition of analytic philosophy that developed throughout the twentieth century. As African American religionist work in the Anglo-American context, there is often a lack of familiarity with this tradition. Exceptions among African Americanists include Paget Henry in the area of sociology, see Paget Henry, Caliban's Reason : Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy, Africana Thought (New York: Routledge, 2000)., Lewis Gordon, as a philosopher, is strongly informed by the existential phenomenological tradition of Sartre as expressed throughout his oeuvre, e.g. Lewis R. Gordon, Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism (Atlantic Highlands, NJ.: Humanities Press, 1995), ———, Existence in Black : An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy (New York: Routledge, 1997), ———, Existentia Africana : Understanding Africana Existential Thought, Africana Thought (New York: Routledge, 2000). As I will note later in this very chapter, individuals such as Frantz Fanon and Richard Wright were very much influenced by the existential phenomenology see Lewis R. Gordon, T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, and Renée T. White, Fanon : A Critical Reader, Blackwell Critical Readers (Oxford Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996). This is in addition to essays in the earlier mentioned Existence in Black by Gordon. Also, as I will also develop, there is the Hegelian phenomenological tradition, which greatly influenced W.E.B. Du Bois. Indeed, it is my contention that Du Bois Souls of Black Folk can be read as a kind of Phänomenologie des Schwarzen Geiste, inspired by Georg Wilhelm Freidrich Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit.
posture of everyday life. The phenomenological attitude, however, is associated with a
kind of displacement, or disengagement, such that one can reflect upon all intentionalities
of human consciousness that are within the natural attitude, but are obfuscated by it. The
adoption of the phenomenological attitude is inferred by many names: the
phenomenological reduction, the transcendental reduction, bracketing, or the *epoche*.\(^9^0\)

It is at this point in the discourse that critiques by the earlier mentioned advocates
of a culturally sensitive phenomenology come into play. Is the natural attitude and
consciousness culturally dependent or independent? Does a contextual approach to
problems of phenomenological description avoid some of the self-contradictions involved
in the finite description of open-ended processes? As it relates to the thesis at hand, are
the constituting activities of the consciousness of African Americans the same as that of
European Americans? Further, what of the natural attitude of African Americans? Does
the phenomenological reduction or *epoche* obtain in the same way as it does for others?

One scholar who has engaged in an extensive investigation of the
phenomenological method as it relates to persons of African ancestry is the sociologist
Paget Henry. Henry’s task is multi-fold, and not all aspects of it are of equal importance
to the line of argumentation that I seek to pursue in this chapter. The first goal of Henry’s
project as presented in his works about phenomenology is his assertion as to the existence
of autochthonous Africana\(^9^1\) phenomenologies in which a self-reflective description of

\(^9^0\) Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*.
\(^9^1\) The term Africana for Henry is associated with thought and cultural products of people of African
ancestry not simply on the African continent, but also of those in Europe, North America, and Central and
South America, inclusive of their hybridity and creolization. In many respects, it is analogous to what
someone like a Paul Gilroy refers to as the Black Atlantic. An area of possible slippage in the use of the
term, however, may be with respect to how inclusive it is of the African continent. It is clear in both Henry
and Gilroy that their primary focus is on persons with some ancestral connection to West Africa in
particular and who had some impact from European contact, which included colonization as well as the
the constituting activities of the consciousness of Africana peoples is accomplished by various indigenous ego-displacing techniques. Henry asserts that such techniques that are associated with or facilitate the bracketing of the natural attitude are culturally dependent.\textsuperscript{92}

Such a cultural approach to phenomenology is an unusual one, as it "culturally conditions the certainty of self-reflective knowledge and raises very explicitly the need to do phenomenology from a comparative cultural perspective."\textsuperscript{93} In reality, Henry's claim is as an epistemic practice, this self-reflectivity is not peculiar to phenomenology and/or philosophy. Rather, it is an activity that can be initiated within a myriad of knowledge modalities, such as art, literature, and religion. Indeed, any discipline that can describe one's everyday practices and engage the transcendental or knowledge-constitutive ground that supports them might be said to be a kind of phenomenology.\textsuperscript{94} These assertions, however, challenge the claims and objectives of the phenomenological tradition in the West, specifically the form of phenomenology developed by Edmund Husserl, who viewed the self-reflective method he developed as disclosing the moments of a universal reason. As mentioned earlier, however, such assertions have been challenged by postcolonial and postmodern/poststructural theorists. It is their contention that what is revealed is not some universal reason operating at the center of the European subject, but

\textsuperscript{92} Henry, \textit{Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy}. 106.

\textsuperscript{93} Paget Henry, "Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications" in \textit{C. L. R. James Journal} No. 11, 1.

\textsuperscript{94} Henry, "Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications," 1. A topic for further study would be an in depth analysis of how various culture groups have engaged in such practices. I believe it to be more than likely that numerous traditional or archaic cultures engage in practices that suspend or displace what is referred to in the phenomenological tradition as the natural attitude. I would anticipate that vehicles and practices associated with trance, possession, dance, music, or entheogenes have the potential to serve such a function.
rather at best the constituting activities of the consciousness of the European people. Husserl famously noted, “European humanity bears within itself an absolute idea [emphasis mine], rather than being merely an empirical anthropological type like ‘China’ or ‘India.’”

Another observation of Henry is that historically, there have been different occasions in which the various forms of self-reflection have taken place, and that these are again, best illuminated through comparative cultural phenomenologies. For example, if one’s concern is the clarifying the foundations of knowledge, the construction of one’s philosophy/phenomenology may well resemble that of Immanuel Kant’s explorations regarding the limits of reason and the relationship between the rational and irrational. For Georg F.W. Hegel, the occasion appears to have been an effort to reconcile theological discourses (spirit) with those found in philosophy (reason) that lead to his phenomenology of mind/spirit in which this dialectic is revealed over the course of history. For Edmund Husserl, the occasion for the development of his phenomenological methodology was articulated in his well-known essay, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Therein he namely sought to articulate a presuppositionless and rigorously formulated foundation of all discourses, an indubitable frame of reference. As suggested by the title of his first significant discourse on phenomenology, *Cartesian Meditations*, as in the case of Descartes, his was a quest for certainty. For Sartre, who was greatly influence by Husserl, it is a fundamentally existential crisis of *mauvaise foi* ("bad-faith" or self-deception) that the European subject

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96 Henry, *Caliban's Reason: Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy*. 151
has consistently brought to the knowing situation in addition to self-deception's ability to appropriate reason in the service of unreason or the irrational. For Derrida, the occasion of self-reflection is what he perceived to be the use of language and its remaining dependence on metaphysics reflected in the West’s logocentrism.

With such a precedent within the phenomenological tradition, the question arises as to what might constitute the crisis in terms of Africana, or more specifically, African Americans as a people. I would suggest that the crisis is that of identity as a consequence of the institution of chattel slavery with its myriad of racializing discourses associated with their oppression. In other words, the occasion for reflection for African Americans has been the racist negating of their humanity. The Africana existential phenomenologist Lewis Gordon refers to such events as the phenomenological disappearance of Africana humanity.

While such a claim may seem obvious to anyone who has studied the history and culture of the African American community, I believe that the complexity of their/our history often obfuscates the underlying psychic, spiritual, or soul-rending agon that inheres in African American being. Succinctly put, it is my contention that the crisis that occasions the kind of disciplined self-reflection of constituting activities of African American selves is racialization and the subsequent fragmentation of African American

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98 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*. 6-26. Derrida’s basic argument is that language does not provide us access to any ding an sich, no one absolute meaning. There is no such thing as full presence of a thing or of a being. Even the binary oppositional approach of the structuralists is flawed, for there is no idea that is unrelated to another idea.
being. Moreover, predicated on such an understanding, I also proffer that the *telos* of African American religious experience is *wholeness*.\(^{100}\)

By fragmentation of African American being, I am referring to what Henry refers to as the creation of "the Negro." For Henry, "the Negro" is the racist reduction of Africana humanity. It is a caricature. Moving from phenomenology to the language of psychology, the Negro might be characterized as the European shadow, the other.\(^{101}\)

Sociologically, "the Negro" made possible the external colonization of an African life-world by a European life-world. Thus, not only was there the fragmentation of Africana being, but also the fragmentation of African civilizations. It was in this context of conquest and subjugation that Africana peoples became part of "the underside of modernity,"\(^{102}\) experiencing what Husserl referred to as the "Europeanization of all other civilizations."\(^{103}\)

I see many resonances with the thought of Georges Bataille. In his seminal work *Theory of Religion*, written in 1948 but first published in 1973, Bataille defines the essence of religion as the search for lost intimacy. This impulse, this quest to "return to intimacy" is associated with a desire to (re)establish "immanence between man and the

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\(^{100}\) I realize that there are those who will challenge such a move with the assertion that I am advocating a kind of essentialism. This is a serious contention, which I believe can be addressed in a number of ways.

- True essentialism has to do with metaphysical and ontological claims, not epistemological ones. The phenomenological method, brackets such questions, it deals with experiences or events in their givenness.
- Essentialism assumes that entities possess characteristics that are universal and immutable, and thus not contextual. The analysis engaged in here is explicitly contextual and none prescriptive. The goal is a phenomenological description of African American religious experience. I do not believe in racial essentialism, but rather that the historical, cultural, and social situatedness of persons of African ancestry in Western society are inextricably tied to phenomenological observations. Such observations are not definitive.

\(^{101}\) Henry, "*Africana Phenomenology*," 4.


\(^{103}\) Husserl and Carr, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, 16.
world, between subject and object.”¹⁰⁴ Through a kind of rupture (for Bataille, this is an evolutionary process associated with the development of a capacity to make distinctions, resulting in human beings perceiving a discontinuity between themselves and some other, some thing), the world of immanence and intimacy is forever closed. Yet, it continues to grasp humanity with “all the fascination of the sacred world, as against the poverty of the profane.”¹⁰⁵ The profane corresponds to the so-called real world, or as Bataille characterizes it, the order of things. Religion, in the sense of re-ligare, literally to bind or bind back, is the form this longing takes. Accordingly, I maintain, African American religion is a kind of inter-locution, something said-between, in the interstices of what has been lost and effaced (a culture, a life-world, a way of being), and that which was and continues to be full of uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk. Religion provided a schematization of their experience that enabled the creation of communities where life was possible.

Thus again, it is my contention that wholeness is the governing telos for African American religious experience that is revealed in and through a culturally attuned phenomenological analysis. It is interesting to note that such an outcome of Africana phenomenological analysis is not one shared by Henry, differing most significantly in that my method wishes to bracket the ethical. By bracketing the ethical, I mean that the phenomenological method as I employ it wishes to attend simply that which is given. As a phenomenological category, wholeness is neither good nor bad; it is not positive or negative. Instead of wholeness, Henry will argue that the governing telos of Africana experience, which presumably would encompass religious experience, has been racial

¹⁰⁴ Bataille, Theory of Religion, 44.
¹⁰⁵ Bataille, Theory of Religion, 35.
liberation and cessation of the racial domination. While this may be an expression of wholeness, liberation as Henry sees it is identified with a progressive construction of history, in keeping with what I have characterized as his modernist orientation. While I concur with Henry that racialization displaces the problem of rationality, as the occasion for self-reflection racial liberation is not synonymous with the telos of wholeness. This is particularly significant if one wishes to examine religious phenomenon in general, and religious experience in particular, in their givenness. It is clear for Henry, as a sociologists as well as African a academic who subscribes to the “hermeneutic of liberation,” that the pursuit of liberation is a good thing. However, in attempting to grasp the phenomenon of African American religion in its givenness, I will bracket such preferences and dispositions.

The issue of telos becomes particularly important with respect to the everyday ethical/practical projects of a people as well as to their construction (or perpetual reconstruction) of the transcendental domain; i.e., the domain of living experience, the region of subjectivity. While Henry does acknowledge that the constructions and reconstructions of the transcendental domain are profoundly influenced by the nature of our projects, he continues to define the principle project of Africana being as racial equality. As I note above, I do not believe racial equality to be the true telos of Africana being or consciousness, but rather it is wholeness. Not only do I believe that wholeness

\[\text{\footnotesize 106 Henry, Caliban's Reason : Introducing Afro-Caribbean Philosophy, pp. 50, 55, 124, 197, 212. Moreover, this is the tradition he associates with the likes of C.L.R. James, Frantz Fanon, and W.E.B DuBois.}\]

\[\text{\footnotesize 107 When I later, in the words of Husserl, “turn to the things themselves,” i.e. the phenomena, it will readily become apparent. However, wholeness is that which is pursued, but never fully grasped. Indeed, the phenomenology bears a close resemblance to Derrida’s study of language, and the concept of difference. While meaning might be the telos of language, it is always differed, it is always receding. All that is left is a trace. Such is the elusive nature of wholeness. It is fleeting, it is receding. This is due to the fragility of human beingness.}\]
provides a better explanation of the occasion of crisis for African Americans, I also believe that it allows for greater openness and inclusivity with respect to the various experiences and projects that exist within and throughout the history of African Americans.¹⁰⁸

An Africana/African American Cultural Phenomenology

In the development of an Africana cultural phenomenology, two names stand out as its progenitors – W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon. Quite independently from one another, one informed by the sociological and historical tradition (Du Bois) and the other by the psychoanalytic tradition (Fanon), their phenomenologies of the Africana subject have resonances that I will utilize in my own phenomenological analysis.

Much has been written over the course of the last decade in an effort to establish Du Bois within the American tradition of pragmatism. For example, in his genealogical study of American pragmatism entitled *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, the distinguished contemporary African American philosopher Cornel West places Du Bois in the tradition of William James, with whom Du Bois studied at Harvard. Although West notes that Du Bois does not embrace James’s philosophy as a whole, he nevertheless places Du Bois within the American pragmatist tradition. This tradition is rooted in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson; it matured in the work of William James and John

¹⁰⁸ As I note in Chapter 2 and 3, I am particularly concerned with the certain normative claims and ethical imperatives that find their way into the study of African American religion. Ultimately, however, I maintain that the concept of wholeness has greater explanatory power than say the concept of liberation or racial equality. Again, there are clearly examples of African American religious experience which one might find hard pressed to include under a rubric of liberation or equality, yet are amenable to something such as wholeness or at least the *trace* there of.
Dewey, and it is currently represented by West as well as West's philosophical mentor, Richard Rorty. Indeed, Du Bois is in many ways West's proto prophetic pragmatist.\(^{109}\)

A similar assertion is also made by Lucius T. Outlaw in his text *On Race and Philosophy*.\(^{110}\) According to Outlaw, while historiography and empirical sociology would provide the primary means by which Du Bois would gather and interpret "that body of fact which would apply to [his] program for the Negro,"\(^{111}\) it would be philosophy in the form of his Harvard philosophy professors James, Royce, and Santayana, and the research methodology of Harvard historian Albert Bushnell Hart, "that Du Bois would continue to develop and apply to the study of race relations."\(^{112}\)

Over against this position, however, I maintain that Du Bois's philosophical, historical, sociological, and psychological analysis is at the very least equally indebted to German idealism and romanticism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly the work of Goethe, Heine, Schiller, and especially Hegel. David Levering Lewis does a wonderful job in exploring the importance of German thought upon Du Bois, particularly with respect to his *Lehrejahre* at the University of Berlin. As Lewis notes, for Du Bois there was no other institution worth considering for a period of study abroad. Berlin was the university of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Leopold von Ranke. There Du Bois would study history, economics, politics, and the burgeoning field of sociology. His teachers would include Gustav von Schmoller, Adolf Wagner, Heinrich

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von Treitschke and the young Max Weber who had received a temporary lectureship during Du Bois’s second year before leaving for a sociology professorship at Freiberg.

In Berlin, Du Bois was powerfully affected by German idealism and romanticism, particularly the work of Goethe, Heine, Schiller, and of course Hegel. From his diary, Lewis notes that Du Bois seemed to be particularly taken by Hegel’s Phenomenology of the Mind [sic]. According to Lewis, it was from this monumental work that Du Bois borrowed “more or less intact notions of distinct, hierarchical racial attributes.” Lewis goes on to say that “for all [William] James’s pragmatic and empirical influences upon him, Du Bois found in the Hegelian World-Spirit, dialectically actualizing itself through history, a profoundly appealing concept.” Likewise, in Hegel’s essay “Lordship and Bondage” that deals with the master-slave dialectic, Du Bois would read

\[
\text{Just as lordship showed its essential nature to be the reverse of what it wants to be, so too, bondage will, when completed, pass into the opposite of what it immediately is: being a consciousness represses within itself, it will enter into itself, and change round into real and true independence.}
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As one whose people had just recently achieved their freedom after centuries of bondage, it is hardly surprising that such a passage would move Du Bois greatly. Indeed, Du Bois would express these same thoughts in his own poetic fashion in the years to come, most notably in the influential The Souls of Black Folk

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113 David Levering Lewis, W. E. B. Du Bois, 1868-1919: Biography of a Race (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 139. Lewis recounts an interesting letter the Fisk alumnus sent to be published in the school’s paper, which charged his peers “to master the culture of Europe and to immerse themselves in Goethe in order to speed ‘the rise of the Negro people.’”

114 The translator of the edition from which Lewis quotes (Harper Collins, 1967) chose to translate the German Phänomenologie des Geistes as Phenomenology of Mind. The more common translation of the title is Phenomenology of Spirit. I maintain that this is particularly informative if one is to understand how Du Bois will deploy Hegel throughout his oeuvre, for Hegel’s Geist is transmuted by Du Bois into Soul.


For the early Du Bois, the Africana subject was a culturally distinct, and hence a non-European site of original meanings, discourses, and experiences. Du Bois derives this understanding from Hegel’s philosophy of history and the evolution of consciousness among various world historical peoples, the telos being the Northern European for Hegel. However, while Hegel excludes African people from history, and thereby relegates them to the domain of nature, the domain of objects, Du Bois includes Africans in history as racialized subjects. As Robert S. Hartman states in his Editor’s Introduction to Hegel’s *Reason in History*, in Hegel, philosophy and history met. Hegel’s understanding of history is built upon his unique metaphysics of the Idea. For Hegel, Thought is what is ideal in the world and the world is the concrete of the Idea. Further, the Idea is dynamic and gives rise to all existence, and all existence is the expression or manifestation of the Idea. Thus, there is the coming together of thought and the concrete.

With respect to space and time, Idea develops in terms of the complements Nature and Spirit. Nature is the development of Idea in space and Spirit is the development of Idea in time. Finally, one comes to History, which is the progressing self-development of Spirit and “embedded in the metaphysical flow of universal scope.” Thus, World History takes place within the Realm of Spirit. Further, Spirit and the course of its development is the substance of history.

Hegel goes on to say that the realm of Spirit consists in what is produced by humanity.

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118 Hegel, *Reason in History*, xii.
The realm of Spirit is all-comprehensive; it includes everything that ever has interested or ever will interest man. Man is active in it; whatever he does, he is the creature within which the Spirit works.119

Further, Spirit has its center as itself. Another way of saying this is that Spirit is Being-within-itself (self-contained existence) which Hegel understands to be Freedom. This self-contained existence of Spirit is also self-consciousness or consciousness as self.120

This leads Hegel to assert that world history is the exhibition of Spirit striving to attain knowledge of its own nature, which is also the progress of the consciousness of Freedom. Therefore, the Spirit’s consciousness of its freedom and the actualization of this Freedom is the final purpose of the world.121

According to Hegel,

This development [the Spirit’s consciousness of its freedom and the actualization of this Freedom] implies a gradation — a series of increasingly adequate expressions or manifestations of Freedom, which result from its Idea. The logical, and — as still more prominent — the dialectical nature of the Idea in general, viz. that it is self-determined — that it assumes successive forms which it successively transcends; and by this very process of transcending its earlier stages gains an affirmative, and, in fact, a richer and more concrete shape; — this necessity of its nature, and the necessary series of pure abstract forms which the Idea successively assumes — is exhibited in the department of Logic. Here we need adopt only one of its results, viz. that every step in the process, as differing from any other, has its determinate peculiar principle. In history this principle is idiosyncrasy of Spirit — peculiar National Genius. It is within the limitations of this idiosyncrasy that the spirit of the nation, concretely manifested, expresses every aspect of its consciousness and will — the whole cycle of its realization. Its religion, its polity, its ethics, its legislation, and even its science, art, and mechanical skill, all bear its stamp. These special peculiarities find their key in that common peculiarity — the particular principle that characterizes a people; as, on the other hand, in the facts which History presents in detail, that common characteristic principle may be detected.122

119 Hegel, Reason in History, 20.
120 Hegel, Reason in History, 23.
121 Hegel, Reason in History, 24.
Thus, the Spirit comes to itself and contemplates itself through certain world-historical peoples (Völker). In other words, the universal/world Spirit (Geist) is actualized through particular/national spirits (Volkgeist) dialectically.

The principles of the national spirits progressing through a necessary succession of stages are only moments of the one universal Spirit, which through them elevates and completes itself into a self-comprehending totality.\(^{123}\)

For Hegel, there are six world-historical peoples or nations: Chinese, Indians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, and Germans.\(^{124}\) Hegel describes this process of world history as beginning with the Oriental World, which is followed by the Greek World, the Roman World and concluding with the German World; i.e., “the History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning.”\(^{125}\) Absent from this scheme, an absence unacceptable for the likes of a Du Bois, are the peoples of Africa and their descendants.

When Hegel does refer to Africans, he says the following:

The peculiarly African character is difficult to comprehend, for the very reason that in reference to it, we must quite give up the principle which naturally accompanies all our ideas-the category of Universality. In Negro life, the characteristic point is the fact that consciousness has not yet attained to the realization of any substantial objective existence – as for example, God, or Law – in which the interest of man’s volition is involved and in which he realizes his own being. This distinction between himself as an individual and the universality of his essential being, the African in the uniform, undeveloped oneness of his existence has not yet attained; so that the Knowledge of an absolute Being, an Other and a Higher than his individual self, is entirely wanting. The Negro, as already observed, exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We

\(^{123}\) Hegel, *Reason in History*, 95.

\(^{124}\) Actually, in Hegel’s scheme, there are subgroups under the larger categories. For example, with respect to “Persia”, Hegel lists the Zend, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes, Persians, Syrians, Jews and Egyptians (Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 3).

\(^{125}\) Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 121.
must lay aside all thought of reverence and morality—all that we call feeling—if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character. The copious and circumstantial accounts of Missionaries completely confirm this, and Mahommedanism appears to be the only thing which in any way brings the Negroes within the range of culture.\textsuperscript{126}

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World. Carthage displayed there an important transitional phase of civilization; but, as is Nahoenician colony, it belongs to Asia. Egypt will be considered in reference to the passage of the human mind from its Eastern to its Western phase, but it does not belong to the African Spirit. What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World’s History.\textsuperscript{127}

It is this move of Du Bois— the addition of persons of African ancestry among world-historical peoples—that is a key innovation to Hegel’s description of consciousness; indeed, it calls into serious question the universality of Hegel’s phenomenology.

In the context of universal and world history, therefore, it was assumed that Africa and the Negro were deemed to have no part. As beings, they were part of Nature and not History. Thus, the study of the Negro was the purview of the natural sciences (\textit{Naturwissenschaften}) as opposed to the human sciences (\textit{Kulturwissenschaften} or \textit{Geisteswissenschaften}). Indeed, as Cornel West so thoroughly develops in his text \textit{Prophesy Deliverance} in the chapter entitled “A Genealogy of Modern Racism,” such an understanding was the consequence of “a creative fusion of scientific investigation,

\textsuperscript{126} Hegel, \textit{Philosophy of History}, 110-111.
\textsuperscript{127} Hegel, \textit{Philosophy of History}, 117.
Cartesian philosophy, Greek ocular metaphors, and classical aesthetic and cultural ideals.”

By this, West means that with the Enlightenment’s adoption of Greek classical aesthetic and culture as normative, along with the burgeoning authority of science as represented in the work of naturalists, anatomists, anthropologists, physiognomists, and phrenologists such as Francis Bernier, Carolus Linnaeus, Georg Louis Leclerc de Buffon, Pieter Camper, and John Kasper Lavater, there emerged the idea of European superiority in modern Western discourse. It is this idea of European superiority that Du Bois must face, and in a bit of almost inconceivable irony, he will rely on the work of the very intellectuals who would have asserted the inferiority of Du Bois and his people, die Schwarzen Völker; i.e. Black Folk. It is Du Bois’s introduction of racialization that will ultimately be the key in his powerful phenomenology of African American consciousness, which Du Bois will come to refer to as the Black soul. Perhaps the earliest glimpse into the effect that German idealism had upon Du Bois can be found in an address he delivered to the American Negro Academy in 1897, entitled “The Conservation of Races.” In this message, Du Bois claimed that the people of the world could be divided into eight identifiable groups called races. This designation bears a striking resemblance to Hegel’s classification of world-historical peoples. Moreover, Du Bois’s conception of race appears to have a great deal in common with the notion of Volk. For example, in answer to his rhetorical question about the nature of race, he states

It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions, and impulses, who are

both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.\textsuperscript{130}

Further,

The American Negro has always felt an intense personal interest in discussions as to the origins and destinies of races: primarily because back of most discussions of race with which he is familiar, have lurked certain assumptions as to his natural abilities, as to his political, intellectual and moral status, which he felt were wrong. He has, consequently, been led to deprecate and minimize race distinctions, to believe intensely that out of one blood God created all nations, and to speak of human brotherhood as though it were the possibility of an already dawning to-morrow.

Nevertheless, in our calmer moments we must acknowledge that human beings are divided into races; that in this country the two most extreme types of the world's races have met, and the resulting problem as to the future relations of these types is not only of intense and living interest to us, but forms an epoch in the history of mankind...

For it is certain that all human striving must recognize the hard limits of natural law, and that any striving, no matter how intense and earnest, which is against the constitution of the world, is vain. The question, then, which we must seriously consider is this: What is the real meaning of Race; what has, in the past, been the law of race development, and what lessons has the past history of race development to teach the rising Negro people?\textsuperscript{131}

Du Bois concludes:

Turning to real history, there can be no doubt, first, as to the widespread, nay universal, prevalence of the race idea, the race spirit, the race ideal, and to its efficiency as the vastest and most ingenious invention for human progress.\textsuperscript{132}

Du Bois accomplishes this through a modification of Hegel's understanding of intersubjectivity. According to Hegel, self-consciousness exists for itself and for another

\textsuperscript{131} Du Bois, \textit{Writings}, 815.
\textsuperscript{132} Du Bois, \textit{Writings}, 817.
self-conscious, which results in a kind of dualism or doubleness. However, in such works as The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois realizes that the ‘for-itself’ of the racialized Africana subject is itself subject to doubling, to a kind of fragmentation. In the Hegelian encounter, there is a sense of “I” and “We.” Yet, for the racialized Africana subject, there is another entity present, a caricature that is the Negro. As a caricature, the Negro is a distortion. As Fanon will later psychologize, the Negro is deemed to be the opposite of white humanity; it is the European shadow.

Du Bois’s double consciousness is a phenomenological account of the self-consciousness of African subjects whose “We” had been shattered and challenged by this process of “negrification.” Thus, the Africana self-consciousness possesses twoness. Paget Henry observes that the catalyst of this fracture or fragmentation of the Africana consciousness is related to the external colonization of the Africana life world by that of the European. Such colonialization is not circumscribed by the occupation of physical spaces or resources, but includes the colonization of all apparatus by which a self is constituted. In the case of Africana peoples, this is associated with their encounter with Europeans. Prior to such an encounter, one could assume the existence of a different African subject. By this, I mean that the subject or self constituted by the African among other Africans, experienced a coherent “We-ness”.

133 The true significance of self-consciousness’s self-recognition in the external, observed thing is its self-recognition in another self-consciousness, which, though a duplicate of itself, has the separateness from itself characteristic of a thing ‘out there.’ Hegel, Phenomenology of Mind), 347.
134 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks; Translated [from the French] by Charles Lam Markmann (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 190.
136 An interesting complement to such an analysis of the African subject intersects the concern of the everyday or everyday life. As noted by Henry, in traditional African cultures, the spiritual was a part of everyday life. Indeed, what I would refer to as the domain of logos – the realm of the rational that includes matters of politics, economics, and production – was subject to the domain of mythos or the spiritual, symbolic, hierophantic and kratophonic realm. However, while Henry maintains that the spiritual
Africans’ encounter with the absurdity that was chattel slavery in the New World, the Africana consciousness was ruptured. They are no longer simply African, but must contend with this thing called the Negro.\textsuperscript{137}

The recognition of this on the part of Africana people, results in what Du Bois will refer to as the second-sight. This is the ability of the racialized Africana subject to see him/herself as a Negro, that is, through the eyes of the white other. First sight is the ability to see one’s self through one’s own eyes. It is to see one’s self as an “I” and to experience the intersubjective consciousness as “We.” The extent to which second sight took the ability to see one’s self as an “I” as opposed to a “Negro,” it constituted a major obstacle to any genuine Africana self consciousness, to the existence of an Africana subject.\textsuperscript{138}

\textit{dimension} of African discourse given to the self was qualitatively different from the world of “everyday life” and resisted assimilation by that world (\textit{Caliban’s Reason}, 60). I maintain that everyday life included \textit{mythos}. Moreover, I assert that to the extent that there was an emphasis or retention of this \textit{mythos} in Africana or African American society, particularly as given in and through religion and the religious, it operates agonistically in relation to other social discourses.\textsuperscript{137}

In the context of colonial discourses, there is the usurping of one culture/society by another. In the case of African Americans, the process is somewhat different. One does not have the introduction of a hegemonic culture to a particular society, but rather the introduction of a diversity of persons who occupy the status of objects, things, or other, into the nascent Anglo-American context. There is no hegemonic shift for the Anglo-American culture, and there is no question as to their legitimacy by a cohesive, coherent, society of a colonized people. African Americans must therefore cultivate, produce, generate symbols, practices, and arguments within the dominate culture. Ontogenesis and sociogenesis take place within the culture of the other.\textsuperscript{138}

This is one of the reasons that I shun the use of the nomenclature complex subjectivity. Subjectivity is always already complex. This is true for all subjects, and particularly in the case African Americans, if one means complex by more than one part. The pre-colonial African subject as understood within most West African cultural contexts was seen as possessing three parts, in a way not dissimilar from classic Western models at least going back to the Greeks, or more contemporary iterations such as Freud’s psychological model of the ego, id, superego. Henry will cite what he refers to as the archetypal understanding of the human in the Akan tradition. The three parts are the Okra (soul), the sunsum (ego) and the honan (body). Henry, \textit{Caliban’s Reason}, 25.
For example, in the first essay of *Souls*, Du Bois – in the Hegelian tradition – alludes to seven “distinctly different races” through whom it might be assumed that the developing Hegelian World-Spirit could be traced.\(^{139}\)

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.\(^{140}\)

Through this association of the Negro with the seventh son, I assert that Du Bois wishes to suggest that the culmination of the Spirit’s progress in history is in the Negro people. Almost assuredly, Du Bois is relying on the tradition of the seventh son as the most favored and of seven in the Judeo-Christian mind being the number of completeness. As Joel Williamson suggests, “Black folk’s” consciousness of freedom for Du Bois is newer and richer than that of any previous world-historical people because of their experience of slavery.\(^{141}\) Additionally, as a “problem” and as “other,” black folk had developed a kind of “double-consciousness.” Black folk have the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others.” This “twoness,” this consciousness of “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body,” means that black folk must uniquely struggle to find true self-consciousness and self-identity.

\(^{139}\) Du Bois, *Writings*, 817. This is a change from the eight to which he alludes in “The Conservation of Races.”

\(^{140}\) Du Bois, *Writings*, 364.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife – this longing to attain self-consciousness manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.¹⁴²

While it may be the case, as suggested by Cornel West, that Du Bois is following his mentor Albert Bushnell Hart’s racialist view of history in which each “race” possesses certain gifts and endowments, this is also very much consistent with Hegel. As to the special gifts of the Negro, Du Bois is particularly fond of the ‘Sorrow Songs,’ the “echo of haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from black souls in the dark past.”¹⁴³ Later, Du Bois will go on to say that

Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song—soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. ¹⁴⁴

Unfortunately, second sight comes frequently at a dear price – the achieving of true self-consciousness by an Africana subject as an “I” or as some “We” that was prior to the encounter with the European - as opposed to a projected “We” that is something called a Negro. However, Du Bois is clear that it does give Africana people an advantage. According to Paget Henry, this takes the form of special access and insight into the

dehumanizing “will to power” of the European imperial subject. Henry refers to this later utilization of second sight as “potentiated second sight.”

The potentiating of second sight is always a possibility in the racialized and divided consciousness of the Africana subject. This possibility can be activated in two basic ways: first through the recovery of a significant measure of first sight, that is the ability to see one’s self as an African as opposed to “the negro” that the white mind was constantly producing and projecting...This ability to see one’s self as an African will depend upon one’s ability to creatively uproot the “blackface” stereotype, and to reconstruct self and world within the creative codes of African discourses and symbols.  

While I believe that Henry is correct in the transformative possibility of potentiated second sight, I disagree with first sight necessitating a self that is “African.” Once more, following the constitution of subjectivity, the real need is to see oneself as an “I” that is connected with a “We” in a holistic or unitive fashion. To the extent that an individual or groups are able to do this, there is the potential for wholeness, for agency, for expressions of subjectivity. Going back to de Certeau, this kind of self-creation often necessitates having a place or space of one’s own. Further, the discourses, practices, and actions involved may vary widely, and is open to bricolage. Again, I assert that the telos is wholeness, which may or may not subscribe to various conventions or notions of liberation. An example of this first way of potentiating second sight alluded to by Henry is Rastafarianism.

The second way that potentiated second sight can be actuated involves one finding an independent point of self-evaluation. Henry points to Du Bois’s opening essay in Darkwater: Voices Within The Veil, “The Souls of White Folk.”

High in the tower, where I sit above the loud complaining of the human sea, I know many souls that toss and whirl and pass, but none there are that intrigue me more than the Souls of White Folk.

Of them, I am singularly clairvoyant. I see in and through them. I view them from unusual points of vantage. Not as a foreigner do I come, for I am native, not foreign, bone of their thought and flesh of their language… I see these souls undressed and from the back and side. I see the working of their entrails. I know their thoughts and they know that I know…they go twisting, flying by my tired eyes and I see them ever stripped, -- ugly, human.\footnote{W. E. B. Du Bois, \textit{Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil}, Sourcebooks in Negro History (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). 29.}

From his tower, Du Bois engages in a kind of transcendental reduction as self-conscious ego. Recall once more that in Husserl's conception, phenomenology is primarily concerned with making the structures of consciousness and the phenomena that appear in acts of consciousness as objects of systematic reflection and analysis. Such reflection was to take place from a highly modified “first person” viewpoint, studying phenomena not as they appear to “my” consciousness, but to any consciousness whatsoever. Du Bois’s poetic reflection serves here to bracket the natural attitude, creating what Henry refers to as a new form of first sight or a kind of third sight.\footnote{Henry, “Africana phenomenology,” 9.} Both strategies, however, offer ways to see through and implode the racist caricature, the false self, created through oppressive discursive practices. Moreover, both postures provide unique insights into the European consciousness. The irony of this process is that it emerges in the “subject” who has become aware of the lived self-contradiction of this deception.\footnote{Lewis R. Gordon, \textit{Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism} (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1999), 33. Gordon notes a comparable observation in the work of Fanon who notes that the absence of his interiority is perceived from the point of view of his interiority.}

Unlike Du Bois’s methodology, Frantz Fanon is indebted to psychoanalysis and French existentialism. Yet, his articulation of the Africana self is very similar to that of
Du Bois. Fanon is emphatic that the African (being or consciousness) is not that of the Negro. “The Negro has one function, that of symbolizing the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul.”151 Likewise, Fanon talks about a racial fissure in the Africana psyche, brought about by racialization or negrification. Fanon comments in *Black Skin/White Mask* on the institutional power of the white gaze. Where Du Bois recounts one of his most memorable instances of racial stigmatization of a white schoolmate that transpired in the gifting of a Valentine card, Fanon talks about an incident with a white child on a train. Upon seeing him, the child says, “Mama, see the Negro! I am frightened.”152 Fanon goes on to say that with this utterance, the psychic rupture became quite real. “It was no longer being aware of myself in the third person [normal intersubjectivity], but in a triple person [the fragmented Africana self or subject as with Du Bois and double consciousness].”153

Fanon, however, was not simply attempting to schematize the Africana consciousness. Rather, his psychoanalytic informed approach involved the exploration of two trajectories: that of the Africana subject who attempts to conceal his negrification with the white mask versus working his way out of the state of negrification.

For Fanon, the first course is essentially a tragic one. It is the course of self-negation, the course of bad-faith. The second course is to reject false consciousness, and to affirm a self of one’s own choosing. Borrowing from the existentialists, one must confront the zone or realm of non-being by going out of and coming back into ego being.154

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152 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.
153 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 112.
If the awakened subject is to achieve denegrification and potentiated second sight, such events must be endured or experienced. For a person this is to confront the abyss of the existentialist, or in the words of Fanon, one must be “able to accomplish this descent into a real hell.” Thus, the notion of the self for Fanon involves the fragility of the ego—an ego unable to launch and stabilize itself and the issue of nonbeing.

The phenomenological method that I will deploy in my analysis is greatly indebted to both classical phenomenology and to an Africana cultural phenomenology. As the various case studies or examples will show, the occasion for the phenomenological reflection is the crisis of the Africana self or subject. As I mention in the introduction of this chapter, while other methodological approaches can be used for descriptive purposes, phenomenology asserts that it is able to encounter the world of experience as it reveals itself, in its givenness.

The context for reflection in each of the cases presented will be the confrontation of African Americans with the distortions, interruptions, and deformations to their self produced by racists and stereotypical reductions within a projective and exploitive context that is America. It is also important to note that religion functions on multiple levels in the various narratives presented. In the move toward ontogenesis or egogenesis, African Americans availed themselves of various resources, e.g., religious, aesthetic,

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155 Henry uses the analogy of rebirth. However, I was thinking of this imagery in terms of Long’s second creation and the relationship again with religion. Is the Africana subject as a second creation fallen, flawed, in need of a third birthing, to be “born again” as the church would say. I know that this language is particularly Christian, but it is interesting when placed in the context of the vivid and pronounced conversion experiences within the African American religious tradition, which I will characterize existentially as the confrontation with non-being, confronting the abyss, undergoing a kind of egogenesis or ontogenesis.

156 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 10.

157 In the conclusion, I posit a phenomenological assessment of the changeling and the metamorph in African American literature such as Milkman’s aunt in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, or the character of Rinehart in Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. These beings accept adaptability while rejecting/resisting static notions of being, which provides them with a certain power.
economic. Each will have a particular authority depending on the context. With respect to
the study of African American religion and religious experience, however,
phenomenological descriptions are not common, and as such, I feel that it may be
necessary to add the following points of clarification in relation to the language deployed
in the descriptive process, in an effort to forestall certain misperceptions.

Firstly, I turn to the phenomenological use of the word "consciousness." The
many references to consciousness given above may give the false impression that I
believe in human reality, or human beingness, as solely a mental phenomenon. This,
however, would be in error. Human consciousness is always embodied consciousness.
One must not forget that phenomenology in the tradition of Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-
Ponty, et al. is an assault on the Cartesian dualism of mind/body. As noted by Lewis
Gordon in *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, for phenomenological descriptions such as
Sartre's, the body stands immune from the "quagmire of reductionism and the infamous
mind-body problem in the history of philosophy since Descartes." 158 The traditional
problem results from what – phenomenologically speaking – is a case of faulty
reductionism, i.e., that the human being is a composite of two substances, mind and body.
But this is not the case for *Dasein*, nor is it the case for consciousness. The Cartesian
reduction leads to the paradox of two different kinds of substances acting as one.
Phenomenologically, however, consciousness is not a substance, is not a thing. Moreover,
the very dichotomization of mind and body, in Sartrean phenomenology, is a form of bad
faith, or what Gordon calls "the reification of consciousness." 159 Calling upon the work
of Calvin Schrag, Gordon adamantly rejects the notion that the mind possesses or has a

body. According to Schrag, "The body is myself in my lived concreteness. My body is who I am. I exist in the world as embodied." Thus phenomenologically, consciousness is always embodied, as well as "I" or "the self."

Secondly, the use of the phenomenological description being deployed here is an attempt to adhere to the methodology proffered by Wayne Proudfoot as referenced in Chapter 1. As a reminder, Proudfoot argues that the first step in developing an explanation of phenomena involves the giving of a rich description of the phenomena. For the purpose of description, I am relying on the phenomenological tradition. This will then be followed by explanation or analysis, specifically utilizing methodologies informed by theories of everyday life. Further, as the form of description will be phenomenological, I eschew descriptive or explanatory models outside of that tradition. Thus, I will not be using or alluding to Foucault in this section as he is not a phenomenologist; indeed, it would probably be most accurate to categorize his intellectual project as anti-phenomenology.

161 Gordon gives the ontological structures of the body as the following: the body as consciousness, consciousness that is known as a body for the Other, and the body as a consciousness that is known as a body for the Other. (Bad Faith, 30).
162 The references for this position are numerous, and I only offer a few here for clarification. One example is David Vessey’s entry on Foucault in the Encyclopedia of Phenomenology [Lester E. Embree, Encyclopedia of Phenomenology, Contributions to Phenomenology: V. 18 (Dordrecht; Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997)] states:

His theorizing intersects with while distancing itself from phenomenology, structuralism, and the history of concepts, and hence does not fit squarely in any of these philosophical camps.

Foucault’s first publication on Binswanger provides the seeds of his future arguments against phenomenology, structuralism, and hermeneutics that together constitute the complexity of his critical project. Specifically, Foucault argues that (1) hermeneutics will miss the fact that “the imaginary world has its own laws, its specific structures”; (2) structuralism will miss the fact that the materiality of linguistic practices are themselves constitutive of meaning; and (3) phenomenology will always seek but never be adequate to what exceeds it and, consequently, will fail in its foundationalist ends.
African American Religious Experiences: Three examples

I now present case studies of three representative, expressions of African American religious experience. I would note that I am unaware of the type of phenomenological and quotidian reading that I provide here within African American religious scholarship. Indeed, it is my contention that the neglect of such theoretical and methodological tools prevails due to near pathological essentialism that persists within the Western intellectual tradition, pathology with deep roots in both the Greek/Hellenistic and the Judeo-Christian traditions that remain the underpinning of much modern

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/) entry on Foucault notes:

... The Order of Things, which was controversial much more for its philosophical attacks on phenomenology (and Marxism) than for its complex and nuanced critique of the human sciences.

John Protevi, professor of French Literature at Louisiana State University, makes the following claim in situating Foucault’s thought:

Foucault is resolutely anti-phenomenological. His early work explicitly turns from the study of subjectivity to the study of cultural systems. He never bothers with studying how a constituted subject comes to know something, but concentrates on the conceptual structures that allow subjects to know. His later work on subjectivizing practices is an outside-in study of material (discursive and non-discursive) practices that produce different forms of subjectivity in different historical circumstances, rather than an inside-out study of the allegedly self constituting history of a concrete subjectivity (what Husserl would call genetic phenomenology).


Stéphane Legrand notes in the article “‘As Close as Possible to the Unlivable’: Michel Foucault and Phenomenology” in SOPHIA (2008) 47:281

‘[...] libérer l’histoire de l’emprise phénoménologique...’ (M. Foucault, L’Archéologie du savoir)

The relationship between the work of Michel Foucault and phenomenology is crystal-clear, is it not? His archaeological method was all about ‘freeing history from the grip of phenomenology’ (translating the above epigraph). Foucault’s rejection of phenomenology, as a theory and as a method, was not only part of the Zeitgeist, one of those things you have to do if you want to be fashionable—no, in fact it was what his whole complex and at times disturbing methodological construction was aiming at.

thought.\textsuperscript{163} The problem of essentialism and exceptionalism in Africana scholarship and cultural production has been noted by the likes of Paul Gilroy. In the \textit{Black Atlantic}, Gilroy maintains that most paradigms for thinking about the cultural history of black people fail before the complex associations and rhizomorphic relationships (intercultural, intracultural, and transnational) that are a part of their collective experience.\textsuperscript{164} Gilroy rejects both essentialism (absolutist and nationalistic orientations) as well as anti-essentialism (vulgar pluralism or relativistic construal) of blackness in favor of a via media (anti-anti-essentialism), “that sees racialised subjectivity as the product of the social practices that supposedly derive from it.”\textsuperscript{165} Likewise, bell hooks, in her essay “Postmodern Blackness,” states “We have too long had imposed upon us both from the outside and the inside a narrow, constricting notion of blackness.”\textsuperscript{166} Similarly, Victor Anderson challenges the essentialized notions of Africana identity, through his critique of ontological blackness, where ontological blackness is an episteme in which black identity is reified, circumscribed, and homogenized. Instead of ontological blackness, Anderson is

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\textsuperscript{163} As I said in the introduction in my discussion on postmodern/poststructuralist thought, this is comparable to what Derrida refers to as “metaphysics of presence.” See Jacques Derrida, \textit{Of Grammatology}. Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 49. A metaphysics of presence is motivated by a desire for a “transcendental signified.” A “transcendental signified” is a signified which transcends all signifiers, and is a meaning which transcends all signs. A “transcendental signified” is also a signified concept or thought which transcends any single signifier, but which is implied by all determinations of meaning.

The “transcendental signified” may be deconstructed by an examination of the assumptions that underlie the “metaphysics of presence.” For example, if presence is assumed to be the essence of the signified, then the proximity of a signifier to the signified may imply that the signifier is able to reflect the presence of the signified. If presence is assumed to the essence of the signified, then the remoteness of a signifier from the signified may imply that the signifier is unable, or may only be barely able, to reflect the presence of the signified.


\textsuperscript{165} Gilroy, \textit{The Black Atlantic}, 102.

\textsuperscript{166} Bell Hooks, \textit{Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics} (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 28.
\end{flushright}
an advocate for construal of black identity that embraces ambiguity and difference associated with what he calls the aesthetics of the grotesque.\textsuperscript{167}

Unfortunately, in the context of habituated notions, such descriptions of religious experiences are apt to be relegated to the domain of the anomalous because of their nonconformity with the conventional. Such approaches, in my estimation, have received less than adequate attention by those who purport concern for the everyday lived experience of African Americans, including experiences of the religious.

In the selection of the case studies, I resolved that a majority – two – should reflect the experience of women in keeping with the disproportionately large presence and participation of women within African American religious communities. Moreover, it was also my intention to select individuals who were “everyday, ordinary people” – persons not susceptible to labels of the exceptional, or what William James referred to as those in possession of religious genius; i.e. the women need not be any kind of religious savants.\textsuperscript{168} At the same time, Helga Crane and Valeria lead quite different lives, in different historical, social, and cultural contexts. Not surprisingly, an initial appraisal of their religious experiences would reveal marked differences.

For the one man among the case studies, however, I chose an individual who very well might be deemed an exceptional religious and spiritual adept – Howard Thurman. It


\textsuperscript{168} However, I do think that phenomenological studies of such savants would be quite illuminating. I would very much like to apply the theoretical and methodological tools of cultural phenomenology and “theories of everyday life” to the religious experiences of the African American female divines such as Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, Shaker Eldress Rebecca Jackson, or Mother Leafy Anderson, founder of the African American Spiritualist Church Movement in New Orleans.
is interesting to note that scholars such as Alton Pollard, Luther Smith, Mozilla Mitchell, John Bryant and Paget Henry have recognized elements of a phenomenological attitude within Thurman’s thought. The form of phenomenological analysis deployed by these scholars, however, is not framed in terms of theories of “everyday life.” Indeed, in their engagement with Thurman as an educator, pastor, theologian, mystic, and catalyst of social change, there is again the tendency to emphasize the exceptional, the spiritual genius. As in the case of Helga Crane and Valeria, however, I wish to intend Thurman on the level of the everyday for Thurman is very much a denizen both of the mysterious and the mundane, of the sublime and the banal. It is in keeping with such an assessment of Thurman that I chose religious experiences and events in the life of Thurman that evince such an orientation, particularly with respect to Thurman’s attunement with his world of immanence, social and natural. It is these instances from which I draw in Chapter 2. Moreover, it is in these instances that I believe the “Apostle of Sensitiveness” has much to reveal to the mindful observer.

Nevertheless, there is something that all three case studies share. They all convey what it is to be a being-in-the-world whose existence as a self is fractured, fragmented, episodic, and at times conflicted and paradoxical. This they share with all beings-in-the-world, with all Dasein. However, they experience a unique kind of fragmentation,

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172 One of the most prolific Thurman scholars, Walter E. Fluker, brings the methodological sensibilities of a church historian and editor/archivist as opposed to a “phenomenologists” in its most generous understanding. It is for this reason that I do not include him in the listing above.
associated with what it is to be African American, the fragmentation that is associated with the phenomenon of racialization mentioned in the earlier discourse on Africana phenomenology.

In this chapter, it is my intention to show that such heterological existences are best explained and interpreted in terms or the theories of everyday life. And moreover, that such ways of being call into question many of the fundamental assumptions of the dominant liberative hermeneutical paradigm.

Howard Thurman

In his autobiography, With Head and Heart, the African American divine and mystic Howard Thurman relates his intimacy with nature and the world around him.

The ocean and the river befriended me when I was child...the ocean and the night together surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behavior of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances. Death would be a minor thing, I felt, in the sweep of that natural embrace.173

Continuing,

When the storms blew, the branches of the large oak tree in our backyard would snap and fall. But the topmost branches of the oak tree would sway, giving way just enough to save themselves from snapping loose. I needed the strength of that tree, and like it, I wanted to hold my ground. Eventually, I discovered that the oak tree and I had a unique relationship. I could sit, my back against its trunk, and feel the same peace that would come to me in my bed at night. I could reach down in the quiet places of my spirit, take out my bruises and my joys, unfold them, and talk about them. I could talk aloud to the oak tree and know that I was understood. It too was a part of my reality, like the woods, the night, and the pounding surf, my earliest companions, giving me space.174

174 Thurman, With Head and Heart, 9.
One story Thurman includes in the autobiography that I find particularly intriguing is his encounter with a small white girl, the child of an old family with whom Thurman’s grandmother had a relationship as their launderer. Through the familial association, Thurman obtained a job with the family involved raking and burning the accumulated leaves in their yard in the fall. It seems that this little girl, four or five years of age, looked forward to the arrival of Thurman as a companion for her loneliness.

Thurman relates that one day, after he had raked the leaves into several piles, the little girl would scatter the piles in search of particularly colorful leaves. She continued to do this despite Thurman’s numerous requests for her to cease and desist. Finally, he threatened to tell her father of her disruptive actions when he came home. At this, she took a pin from her pinafore and drove it into his hand. Thurman draws back in pain and asks the child what possessed her. According to Thurman, the girl’s simple response was that he was only acting injured, for as an African American, he did not feel pain.

Thurman notes that when he came home, he told ‘Grandma’ about it. He describes her as always being there for him – “the receptacle for the little frustrations and hurts I brought to her.”


A Phenomenology of Howard Thurman

It is my contention that the three events noted above each constitute a religious experience. As stipulated in Chapter 1, a religious experience is best defined as any experience (understood as an event that one lives through either as a participant or an observer and about which one is conscious or aware) in which what is experienced by the

175 Thurman, With Head and Heart, 11-12.
176 Thurman, With Head and Heart, 12.
person is taken to be an encounter with the “real” or “true.” Depending on one’s tradition, this is may be referred to as God (a representative of God, or other theophanies), Nature, the Ground, the Ultimate, the Infinite, or the self.

In the first two examples, one has Thurman recounting his early intimacy with the natural world. This is Thurman, the nascent mystic, who will develop a panentheistic theology dealing with the immanence of the Divine in the world and human relationships. Such experiences are not uncommon among those who study religion. Indeed, Thurman’s accounts are quite consistent with those referred to by the likes of Schleiermacher, Otto, and James, with whom I dealt in the first chapter. The feeling of absolute dependence, the uncanny, and the oceanic all find resonance with Thurman’s words in the first two pericopes.

Even more thought provoking, however, is the story of Thurman’s interaction with the small girl. In this seemingly innocuous event, Thurman is confronted with an existential-ontological crisis in which his conscious self, his empirical ego is fractured and fragmented. Indeed, this event is reminiscent of the scenario earlier referenced in the first part of the chapter, from Fanon’s Black Skin, White Mask. Once more, the catalyst for the event is a white child. In the case of Fanon, it is the discursive power of the word, ‘Negro’ that shatters his perception as a ‘self’, as an ‘I’, as a ‘subject.’ In the case of Thurman, though one might be given to focus on the physical assault, i.e., the child sticking him with a pin from her dress, this is to miss the discursive component, that of the speech act of the girl. Thurman himself alludes to the girl’s actions as being rooted in frustration and annoyance. Indeed, it does not appear to be an act of hatred, malice, or retaliation, for when Thurman draws back in pain and surprise and asks her what she was
doing, she also seems surprised. She does not respond by telling him that he was being punished for, say, his insolence. Rather, she is confused as to why Thurman is feigning being in pain. Surely they are both aware that he, as an African American, is incapable of such a sensation.\footnote{Once more, I am talking about the phenomenological body. This is not the body as social-cultural construct. Such considerations are bracketed. My emphasis is not on how a constituted subject comes to know something, but rather concentrates on the conceptual structures that allow subjects to know as opposed to the conceptual structures that allow subjects to be known. Again, as Protevi asserts, theories such as Foucault’s offer an outside-in study of material (discursive and non-discursive) practices that produce different forms of subjectivity in different historical circumstances, rather than an inside-out study of the allegedly self constituting history of a concrete subjectivity (what Husserl would call genetic phenomenology). In this chapter, my focus is with the latter question and not the former.}

Articulated differently, she is a declaration of his lack of “humanity.” She is saying that he is not a self or subject. As she perceives things, Thurman is not a person. This is not as the famous Jewish scholar Martin Buber would characterize an “I-Thou” relationship. As such, the intersubjective association is one that is quite complex. This is not simply the awareness of one’s self, another, and the others perception of you, because “you” – “one’s self” – is not one. This is Du Bois’s double consciousness – Du Bois’s phenomenological account of the self-consciousness of Africana subjects whose “We” had been shattered and challenged by this process of “negrification.” It is also Fanon’s triple person [the fragmented Africana self or subject as with Du Bois and double consciousness person]. Interestingly, in his recollection of this incident, the last words are the girls. He does not respond directly to her comment. Ontologically, she is undone him, disassembled his consciousness as a self. Again, as Fanon notes, in his phenomenological analysis, Thurman is confronted with existential non-being. It is important to emphasize that the task here is phenomenological description, not explanation or analysis.
In the wake of the trauma, however, Thurman returns to his grandmother, and tells her what has happened. It was something that seems simple, and ordinary, but there is great significance in this encounter. The interaction between the old woman and her grandchild is a moment of restitution, of constitution, of – for some indeterminate – period of being restored as a self. The intimacy and identification with his grandmother appears to afford him the opportunity to be in touch with that which is more real, more true, than what he had earlier experienced, bringing about a moment of wholeness and equilibrium to the metastable self.  

**Helga Crane**

The source of the next example of African American religious experience to which a phenomenological analysis will be deployed is the protagonist of Nella Larsen’s 1928 novel *Quicksand*, a young woman by the name of Helga Crane. I have selected this work and character for a variety of reasons. Firstly, while Larsen’s work has seen a resurgence among scholars interested in early twentieth century African American or women’s literature, it is my opinion that as a resource for reflection on African American religion and religious experience, it introduces interesting opportunities which have not been sufficiently explored. While references to the literature of Zora Neal Hurston – a contemporary of Larsen – as well as contemporary authors such as Alice Walker and

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178 The metastability of the self is a fundamental principle to existential phenomenology. It is described by Sartre, and is characterized by his famous axiom from *Being and Nothingness* that existence precedes essence. The use of the term metastable, however, as it relates to existentialism, is deployed by Lewis Gordon. As I have said earlier, this is one of the reasons that I do not care for the language of complex subjectivity. The subject, the self, is always already complex, in the sense that it is constituted of various parts. Depending on the model of self one is using, whether the traditional African self, the classic philosophical self, or the self of psychoanalysis (all of which curiously have in common three components), the subject is complex. Moreover, in the case of African American, the subject is further fragmented. Indeed, what the subject longs for is to be simple as opposed to complex, whole instead of fragments or parts. The quest is for a unitive existence. To invoke Bataille, to be like “water in water.”
Toni Morrison in works such as *The Color Purple*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved* are frequently invoked in the scholarship of African American religionists, Larsen’s work is not.

Crane is the daughter of a white Danish mother and an African American father. As a person of mixed ancestry, she functions in the novel as the quintessential outsider, in search of a place to call home, somewhere to belong. Due to her gender, her racial-ethnic mix, and her intellect, she occupies the status of 'other' within numerous communities and social contexts. As ‘other,’ she is spurned as one who does not possess a space or place within the *nomos* of Western society, while simultaneously is an attractant as a kind of *objet d'art*.

Indeed, the Helga Crane is indicative of a character found within African American literature that has come to be referred to as the “tragic mulatto/a.” Dr. David Pilgrim, Professor of Sociology at Ferris State University, traces the origin of the persona to a work by Lydia Maria Child in two short stories: “The Quadroons” (1842) and “Slavery's Pleasant Homes” (1843). The female hero of the first short story, Rosalie, was born of a white slave owner and a black female slave. Unaware of her maternal parentage, she assumes herself to be white. Upon the death of her father, however, her parentage was revealed. Her lover abandoned her and she was subjected to violence and brutality. In the second story, Frederic Dalcho, master of a Georgian plantation, is killed by his half brother, the quadroon George, whom he owns. Frederic had precipitated the death of George’s wife. A similar portrait is painted

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by the African American abolitionist William Wells Brown in his novel *Clotel*, published in 1853.\(^{180}\)

As a literary device, the tragic mulatto/a was frequently associated with characteristics such as self-hatred, depression, alcoholism, sexual perversion, and suicide. If light enough to “pass” as White, she often did so, but passing often led to deeper self-loathing. The mulatta pitied or despised Blacks and the “blackness” in her; she hated or feared Whites yet desperately sought their approval. In a racialized society, the only peace for the tragic mulatta was frequently the peace of the grave. Sterling Brown summarized the treatment of the tragic mulatto by white writers:

To them he is the anguished victim of divided inheritance...they work it out that his intellectual strivings and self-control come from his white blood, and his emotional urgings, indolence and potential savagery come from his Negro blood. Their favorite character, the octoroon, wretched because of the “single drop of midnight in her veins,” desires a white lover above all else, and must therefore go down to a tragic end.\(^{181}\)

The commonly held belief that “mixed blood” brought sorrow. If only they did not have a “drop of Negro blood.” George M. Fredrickson, author of *The Black Image in the White Mind*, claimed that many White Americans believed mulattoes were a degenerate race because they had “White blood” which made them ambitious and power hungry combined with “Black blood” which made them animalistic and savage. Mulatto women were depicted as emotionally troubled seducers and mulatto men as power hungry criminals.\(^{182}\)

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\(^{180}\) Pilgrim, “The Tragic Mulatto Myth.”


Vera Caspary's novel *The White Girl* (1929) told the story of Solaria, a beautiful mulatto who passes for White. Her secret is revealed by the appearance of her brown-skinned brother. Depressed, and believing that her skin is becoming darker, Solaria drinks poison. A more realistic but equally depressing mulatto character is found in Geoffrey Barnes's novel *Dark Lustre* (1932). Alpine, the light-skinned "heroine," dies in childbirth, but her white baby continues her mother's tragic cycle. Both Solaria and Alpine are repulsed by African Americans, particularly those whom they perceived to be suitors.

Perhaps the most famous portrayal of the tragic mulatta is that of Peola in the novel *Imitation of Life* (1933). Tired of being treated as a second-class citizen, she decides to pass for white and begged her mother, Delilah, to understand.

Don't come for me. If you see me in the street, don't speak to me. From this moment on I'm White. I am not colored. You have to give me up.

Peola wants to live without the stigma of her African ancestry. Ultimately, Peola rejects her mother, runs away, and passes for white into the majority society. The novel ends with a tearful Peola at the funeral of her mother, who has died of a broken heart.

*Quicksand*, along with Larsen's second novel *Passing*, is typically viewed by literary critics as a fictionalized and poeticized self-reflective version of the author's own life. This is similar to Richard Wright in *Black Boy* and *The Outsider*, where the narratives are rooted in personal experience. Like her protagonists, Nella Larsen is

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“mixed-race” or “bi-racial.” The child of a Danish mother and a “colored” father, Larsen, like Helga Crane, wrestles with issues of identity and self.\(^{187}\)

Returning to *Quicksand*, the story begins with Helga as a teacher in Naxos. The reader is informed that when she first arrived at the school, she was filled with the desire to educate African American children. However, her sense of vocation is put to the test and her passion wanes as she confronts the parochialism and provincialism of the school and the greater African American community. She soon comes to feel unwelcome and out of place, an outcast. Even her engagement to fellow instructor James Vale does not bring her the acceptance that she seeks, for he comes from a prominent black family that disapproves of her because she does not have the proper pedigree.

In an impulsive move, Helga boards a train to Chicago, the place of her birth and a place she once called home. Unfortunately, she discovers that there is no place for her there. This is uniquely portrayed in the changed relationship with her maternal Uncle Peter. The once beloved figure, and indeed, the only supportive male figure in Helga’s life, has married a woman who wishes to have nothing to do with her. Indeed, the new

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\(^{187}\) Thadious M. Davis, “Nella Larsen.” *Dictionary of Literary Biography* Vol. 51: *Afro American Writers from the Harlem Renaissance to 1940* (Detroit, MI: Gale Research Co. 1987), 182-192. Davis comments that “Implicit in her reticence about her background is some discomfort in being the only black member of her immediate family.” According to *The African American National Biography*, she was born to a Danish immigrant mother and a “colored” father. On 14 July 1890, Peter Walker and Mary Hanson applied for a marriage license in Chicago, but there is no record that the marriage ever took place. Larsen told her publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, that her father was “a Negro from the Virgin Islands, formerly the Danish West Indies” and that he died when she was two.

After attending high school in Chicago, Larsen studied science at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. From the all-black world of Fisk, Larsen attended the University of Copenhagen from 1910 to 1912. Larsen studied nursing from 1912-15 at Lincoln Hospital in New York City. She then spent two years as assistant superintendent of nurses at Tuskegee Institute. The next three years, from 1916-18, she worked as a nurse at her alma mater, Lincoln Hospital. It was while she was working as a Department of Health nurse for New York City from 1918-21 that she was first published in *The Brownies' Book*, a children’s magazine. She married physicist Elmer S. Imes on May 3, 1919. Shortly thereafter, Larsen took a job as a librarian in the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library. A fixture among authors of the Harlem Renaissance, Larsen would become a recluse after 1941 with accusations of plagiarism regarding her writing and infidelity on the part of her husband. She died in 1964.
Mrs. Nilssen believes she is completely justified in her decision, and feels that Helga should understand why she is not wanted. Helga later receives a letter from her uncle saying that he must accede to his wife’s wish and severs all ties with his niece.

Helga is once more compelled to move, this time grasping an opportunity to make her way to Harlem as an assistant of a white suffragist, who is also interested in the uplift of African Americans. Through her employer, Helga meets Anne Grey, who befriends and introduces her to all the right members of “Negro society.” Finally, it seems, she has found a place where she belongs, where she can be part of a community. Helga notes,

\[\text{[a]gain she had that strange transforming experience, this time not so fleetingly, that magic sense of having come home. Harlem, teeming black Harlem, had welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment.}\]188

In Harlem, Helga becomes reacquainted with the former principal of the school at where she had taught in Naxos – Dr. Robert Anderson. There is clearly an attraction between the two, an almost palpable sexual tension present in all their interactions. Regrettably, the relationship is also fraught with misunderstandings, contention, and conflict, such that it has no future. Moreover, the same feelings begin to exist between Helga and her community.

\[\text{“It was as if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed up with that something in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien. Why [. . .] should she be yoked to these despised black folk?”}\]189

In an ironic twist, Anderson becomes betrothed to Helga’s friend and sponsor, Alice Grey, and Helga once more sets flight for a place where she can belong.

\[\text{\underline{189} Larsen and Davis, Quicksand, 54-55.}\]
Helga goes to Copenhagen, where from her mother came. She is welcomed and hosted by her Aunt Katrina and Uncle Poul. Through their efforts and social maneuvering, Helga gains entrée among the cultural elite. Unfortunately, she soon learns that she is accepted as an exotic (as well as the erotic). Ultimately rejecting the proposal of one of the city’s leading young artists, Helga returns to Harlem and the United States.

Rejected, alone, forsaken, she nevertheless attends a society party where she runs into Robert Anderson. Noticing that they are alone, Anderson unconsciously kisses her and she is surprised by the passion it stirs within her. Later, however, Anderson apologizes to her and admits that he was a “fool” to have kissed her.

She had ruined everything [...] because she had been so silly as to close her eyes to all indication that pointed to the fact that no matter what the intensity of his feelings or desires might be, he was not the sort of man who would for any reason give up one particle of his own good opinion of himself. Not even for her. Not even though he knew that she had wanted so terribly something special from him.

At this revelation, Helga is crestfallen and finds herself walking the street in the rain. To escape the deluge, she enters a Harlem church during what appears to be a revival. The guest preacher is one Rev. Green. In this context, Helga undergoes a religious conversion, believing that God has provided a means for her to find happiness. As the conduit of God’s grace, Helga is drawn to Rev. Green, whom she quickly marries, and returns with him to his congregation in rural Alabama. Once more, she attempts to fit in, to find a place, but after giving birth to three children in two years time, she becomes seriously ill. It is in the midst of her bedridden status that she realizes that even this last

choice was not one of salvation, but rather a kind of prison in which she must somehow find a way to persevere.

Everything in her mind was hot and cold, beating and swirling about. Within her emaciated body raged disillusion. Chaotic turmoil. With the obscuring curtain of religion rent, she was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing that she had done to herself. She couldn’t, she thought ironically, even blame God for it, now that she knew He didn’t exist. No more than she could pray to Him for the death of her husband, the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. The white man’s God. And His great love for all people regardless of race! What idiotic nonsense she had allowed herself to believe. How could she, how could anyone, have been so deluded? How could ten million black folk credit it when daily before their eyes was enacted its contradiction? Not that she at all cared about the ten million. But herself. Her sons. Her daughter. These would grow to manhood, to womanhood, in this vicious, this hypocritical land. The dark eyes filled with tears.

However, this is not Helga’s sole revelation. She now sees that religion was a palliative. It was an analgesic, a painkiller. Yet, concurrent with such attributes, was the potential for religion to create a kind of bondage for African Americans. Thus, if there was a God, it was the white man’s God, and He must find humor in the suffering of the poor and the oppressed.

She had ruined her life, made it impossible ever again to do the things that she wanted, have the things that she loved, mingle with the people she liked. She had, to put it as brutally as anyone could, been a fool. The damnedest kind of fool. And she had paid for it. Enough. More than enough.

Her mind, swaying back to the protection that religion had afforded her; almost she wished that it had not failed her. An illusion. Yes, but better, far better, than this terrible reality. Religion had after all, its uses. It blunted the perceptions. Robbed life of its crudest truths. Especially it had its uses for the poor – and the blacks.

For the blacks. The Negroes.
And this, Helga decided, was what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man’s God, this childlike trust in full

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192 Larsen and Davis, *Quicksand*, 131.
compensation for all woes and privations in “kingdom come.” Sary Jones’s absolute conviction, “In de nex’ worl’ we’ all recompense’,” came back to her. And ten million souls were as sure of it as was Sary. How the white man’s God must laugh at the great joke he had played on them! Bound them to slavery, then to poverty and insult, and made them bear it unresistingly, uncomplainingly almost, by sweet promises of mansions in the sky by and by.\textsuperscript{193}

\textit{A Phenomenology of Helga Crane}

Throughout the novel, Helga enters into various environments with the best of intentions and the hope that she will find a home and in so doing, find herself. Yet, invariably, Helga eventually deems each place inadequate. \textit{It is Helga’s insecure identity that accounts for her perpetual discomfort in various communities. Helga’s mixed race and unsupportive family history are the major contributing factors to her inability to form a strong personal identity and, subsequently, to attain contentment in her numerous living situations.}

Helga’s first difficulty comes from her ideas about family and background, as she is the child of an absent black father and a white, foreign mother. Subsequently, Helga grows up as the sole non-white in a household that contained her mother, stepfather, and stepsiblings. As a young adult, to all intents and purposes, she is an orphan. As she considers her experience in Naxos, and her decision to release her fiancé from his obligation, she reflects,

No family. That was the crux of the matter. It accounted for everything. Her failure here in Naxos, her former loneliness in Nashville...If you couldn’t prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn’t “belong.”\textsuperscript{194}

\textsuperscript{193} Larsen and Davis, \textit{Quicksand}, 134 -5.  
\textsuperscript{194} Larsen and Davis, \textit{Quicksand}, 12.
According to Helga, as a person with no family, she has no standing in African American society, and thus is expected to be “inconspicuous and conformable.”

Helga then must face the myriad of discourses that seek to define and constitute her “self” alone. Although she associates with the African American community, Helga never succeeds in adopting a sense of “we.” Moreover, she feels that the African American community of Naxos unreflexively conforms to white society's expectations of what is appropriate behavior and in so doing, denies their cultural genius.

Later, among the black intellectuals of Harlem, Helga for a time has a “we” sense, meeting other blacks “with tastes and ideas similar to her own.” Yet this does not translate into personal connection. In Copenhagen, she refuses the hand of the young artist, claiming,

You see, I couldn’t marry a white man. I simply couldn’t. It isn’t just you, not just personal, you understand. It’s deeper, broader than that. It’s racial…if we were married, you might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate all dark people. My mother did that.

Helga, once more, in her struggle to be a self, a subject, in the context of a racialized society, is thwarted. She longs to be appreciated as an individual, as an “I,” not in the context of being a thing, an exotic, and a color.

Phenomenologically, Helga is confronted with the contingency of her existence. In the absence of a definite position, she must perpetually confront non-being. Yet she is not willing to conform or accept social conventions or cultural norms in order to belong, for that would be an act of self-deception, of bad faith. Nonetheless, there persists the craving for wholeness, fullness, and completeness.

Larsen and Davis, _Quicksand_, 12.
Larsen and Davis, _Quicksand_, 46.
Larsen and Davis, _Quicksand_, 90.
It is my contention, however, that Helga's struggle to be, to be a "self," an "I," is revealed most clearly in the context of her religious experiences, the first of which is her conversion experience, and the second, her moment of revelation on her sick bed toward the end of the novel.198

As noted above, Helga enters the revival in a state of distress. She feels lost, unable to get her bearings on anything outside herself or within herself that gives her a sense of identity. Her world does not make sense. As she stumbles along the street in the rain, she is literally blown by wind and water into a swollen gutter. Yet, it comes into her mind that she cannot give up, that she is not ready to die, no matter how it is often romanticized.199

Therefore, Helga stumbles to her feet and enters the door of what she takes to be a store. As she does so, however, she is greeted by voices singing a song from some distant past – her past. She has walked into a church service, and those in attendance are singing the hymn "Showers of Blessings." She is overcome by a rush of emotion as well as the seeming irony and absurdity of her appearance, at that moment. Subsequently, she collapses on the floor in fits of crying and laughter.

All in the hall comes to an abrupt halt, while she is assisted to a seat at the front of the congregation. With that, song once more rises, this time "a low wailing thing."200 The song has an almost hypnotic effect on her, inducing a trancelike state.

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198 Again, while some might wish to call attention to concepts such as the social body, this is not part of the phenomenological ontology as noted above.
199 Larsen and Davis, *Quicksand*, 110. "Now she knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she had no desire to die, and certainly not there and then. Not in such a messy wet manner. Death had lost all of its picturesque aspects to the girl lying soaked and soiled in the flooded gutter.
Oh, the bitter shame and sorrow
That a time could ever be
When I let the Savior's pity
Plead in vain, and proudly answered,
“All of self and none of Thee.”

Yet He found me; I beheld Him
Bleeding on the accursed tree;
Heard Him pray:
“Forgive them, Father”;
and my wistful heart said faintly,
“Some of self and some of Thee.”

Day by day, His tender mercy,
Healing, helping, full and free,
Sweet and strong, and, oh, so patient,
Brought me lower, while I whispered,
“Less of self and more of Thee.”

Higher than the highest heavens,
Deeper than the deepest sea,
Lord, Thy love at last has conquered;
Grant me now my soul’s desire,
“None of self and all of Thee.”

After the song, the intensity of the congregation as a whole seems to increase.

Ecstatic expressions of worship surrounded her, exhorting her to “come to Jesus.”

Initially viewing herself apart from the frenzy before her, Helga perceives the writhing
and weeping with contempt and disdain. Yet, as prayers, moans, and chants proceed,
Helga is gripped by “an indistinct horror of an unknown world.” Though now repulsed by
what surrounded her, “the horror held her.”

Soon, she too felt the urge to shout, to scream, to be one with the crowd, to share
in the madness. Larsen describes this as the moment that she was lost – or saved. Out of
her mouth burst the words appealing for God’s mercy. She is then embraced by the

201 “None of Self, All of Thee” by Theodore Monod. Penned July of 1874. Larsen includes the first two
verses and the last line of the third in the text. She does not include any from the last verse, with its
suggestion of total surrender.
women around her and "The thing became real. A miraculous calm came upon her. Life seemed to expand, and to become very easy." As the service ends, Helga approaches the guest preacher of the evening, Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green, and accepts his offer to escort her back to her hotel. When she awakes the next morning, she develops a plan, which she believes will result in her continued happiness; namely, she decides to persuade the preacher to marry her.

She arrives with her new husband in the small town in Alabama where his church is located. Helga threw herself into this new life with much relish. As the wife of the pastor, she sought to become the model of domesticity, attempting to create a place of beauty for herself and those around her amidst the ugliness of the poverty-stricken community. As the pastor's wife, she joined the other women in mission work, outreach, and the care and education of the children. She did all this despite being perceived as an outsider, as elitist, and as naïve.

As mentioned earlier, she soon found herself with three babies and with another on the way. Surprisingly, despite her almost constant state of exhaustion, she does her best to maintain a positive outlook. Finally, however, with the birth of the fourth child, another "little dab of amber humanity...contributed to a despised race," Helga entered a kind of catatonia. Unresponsive to all around her, she closed her eyes and remained lying in her bed. Larsen describes Helga as having gone down into the abyss of pain where, though terrifying and horrible, there was also a freeing element. It is this event

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202 Larsen and Davis, *Quicksand*, 114. A difficulty throughout the novel is the maintenance of the distinction between the author/narrator and the character. In the case of Helga’s conversion experience in the storefront church, this is made all the more complex by what is presumably the narrator’s observations about the experiences of the others. I have chosen to say little about them here. Their omission is not a pronouncement regarding their importance, but rather a matter of attempting to maintain focus on Helga.

203 Larsen and Davis, *Quicksand*. 128.
that I see as the other significant religious experience for Helga, her second conversion experience in many respects.\textsuperscript{204}

Though described as an event of peace and joy, Helga eventually leaves her sick state after a few weeks. When she opens her eyes, she is greeted by her nurse, Miss Hartley with the words, “Well, here you are!” to which Helga responded, “I’m back.” When her husband approaches, she finds herself repulsed by him and all that he represents. As Helga rests in bed alone, she is able to reflect on her situation, on her predicament. “The cruel, unrelieved suffering had beaten down her protective wall of artificial faith in the infinite wisdom, in the mercy, of God.”\textsuperscript{205} She had called out to God and God was not there, because she now knows that there is no God. Moreover, life was no miracle, no wonder, at least not for African Americans.

With the obscure curtain of religion rent, she was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing she had done to herself. She couldn’t, she thought, even blame God for it, now that she knew that He didn’t exist.

It is my contention that Helga’s rejection of God coincides with her finally taking responsibility for her choices, as well as jettisoning belief in a “true self.” Thus again, there is the realization that the self as subject is a metastable construct. Again, in true Sartrean fashion, human life is absurd. We crave wholeness, fullness, and completeness, but it is not something that we can fully possess. Humans are both subjects and objects. As such, we exist as \textit{pour soi} (for-itself) and as an \textit{en soi} (in-itself). In her rejection of God and of the true self as something static and immutable, she embraces a self. Helga does this when, in the language of Fanon, the colonized thing can only become human

\textsuperscript{204} This is an interesting case where the spiritual can no longer repress the physical, when the body demands to be taken seriously.

\textsuperscript{205} Larsen and Davis, \textit{Quicksand}. 131.
when it identifies the subtle colonizing tactics of ontotheological representation (the colonizer as God or the representative of God, i.e., a chosen or elect) and then claims its own identity through a process of self-creation and self-definition.\textsuperscript{206}

\textit{Valeria}

In an essay entitled ""Jesus is my Doctor’: Healing and Religion in African American Women’s Lives,"\textsuperscript{207} Stephanie Y. Mitchem shares the present day story of Valeria, a middle aged African American woman who believes in and has experienced faith healing. Her first experience of such healing was associated with her suffering from hepatitis. Later, she would call upon her faith in dealing with chronic back pain. Valeria currently lives in the suburbs outside of Detroit. She is employed by the state of Michigan in position that can be characterized as middle management. Nearing retirement, due to either her age or the number of years of service she has accumulated, Valeria’s plans for the future include starting her own business.

Valeria is a member of Great Faith Ministries International, Detroit. This nondenominational, predominantly black and Christian congregation is located in a poor part of the city – the Barton-McFarland neighborhood. The church building consists of a converted movie theater and several adjacent buildings at 10735 Grand River. The church has developed an extensive outreach via radio, TV, and the internet. They also have established a presence in the Atlanta, Georgia area. Under the leadership of Bishop

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{206} Sartre, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 548.
\item \textsuperscript{207} Stephanie Y. Mitchem, “'Jesus is my Doctor': Healing and Religion in African American Women’s Lives,” in Linda L. Barnes and Susan Starr Sered, \textit{Religion and Healing in America} (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)
\end{itemize}
Wayne T. Jackson and his wife, Dr. Beverly Y. Jackson, the church presents a message that it is God’s wish for his people to prosper in all areas of their lives.

As noted above, the first instance of faith healing followed Valeria’s diagnosis of “a type of hepatitis.” After receiving the news of her infection status, she attended her church in Detroit. On a Sunday when the ministers of healing were present, parishioners with various diseases where invited to come forward for the laying on of hands. When the invitation was extended to those who had blood disorders, Valeria went forward. At her next blood test, Valeria states that the results came back negative, that there was no disease present.

Valeria’s second experience of healing also came through her church. This time, the church ministry was responsible for facilitating the cure of her chronic back pain. Valeria thus began to follow a daily morning regime of prayer and self-anointing with special oils. In reflecting on her interactions with Valeria and the members of Great Faith, Mitchem notes that they all “understand God as active in their everyday lives.” Valeria shares “I stay [at Great Faith] because God has not told me to go anywhere else… also I believe that God’s power is demonstrated there.”

Mitchem asserts that such an understanding of the relationship between faith and healing reveals the continued influence of African American folk religion. Further, for her, this is also related to what she refers to as “ordinary theologies,” which she asserts are to be found throughout African American communities. Mitchem says the following:

African American women express black cultural understandings in the retention of an embodied spirituality, that is, a connected body-spirit view of self that yields culturally informed religious understandings. Valeria’s

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208 Mitchem, “Jesus is my Doctor”, 286.  
209 Mitchem, “Jesus is my Doctor”, 286.  
210 Mitchem, “Jesus is my Doctor”, 286.
understanding of illness demonstrates these connections: ‘Illness to me is when you don’t have a spirit of forgiveness and you don’t have joy. You know, just to see the sun outside, I was joyous. I was excited. I felt like I had some pep, some energy.’

Mitchem notes that Valeria’s faith based healing represents a common theme in the health/healing experience of African American women in the United States.

Faith lies at the core of the ordinary theologies of African American women such as Valerie. Faith, for many black women, becomes a self-defining center that resists socially constructed stereotypes. God is known as one who can make a way out of no way. Therefore, taking a problem in life to God is seen as an active step toward its resolution. As such, faith becomes a tool of resistance, rejecting limits and dehumanization. Faith offers the believer self-empowerment through God’s power. Believing is an activity that taps power. “God is able” is both a statement of faith and a battle cry. Thus, the development of black women’s faith is not merely a response to social conditions or a form of denial. Faith can provide the alternative space in which black women become self-empowered. Faith in this framework has the cultural groundings of the black community and black women’s networks, but it involves a lifelong process of spiritual maturation.

Mitchem references Karen Baker-Fletcher and her reflections on the body-soul connections in black women’s religious thought:

God is present in our everyday lives, and infinite possibilities for healing and wholeness are in our midst... It is in our human bodies, souls, and minds in our everyday lives that we experience and reason about the sacred. Such everyday experience of and thought about the sacred enables humankind with powers of sustenance to practice survival, healing, and liberation in the midst of oppression.

The grounds for black women’s acceptance of faith healing cannot be dismissed as simply a response to economic stress. That Valeria, who is in a management position, is not in an economically depressed situation to which she responds by believing in faith

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211 Mitchem, “Jesus is my Doctor”, 287.
212 Mitchem, “Jesus is my Doctor”, 287.
healing highlights the complexities in this study. The key, Valeria stressed, is belief:

"You gotta believe to be healed. You must have faith."\(^{214}\)

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A Phenomenology of Valeria

Health care has been a site of struggle for African Americans since their arrival in North America. How does one maintain a positive view of oneself when he/she is seen as an object of disdain? African Americans deeply mistrust American medicine.\(^{215}\)

With respect to African American’s experience of traditional Western medicine (allopathic and osteopathic), there has been a great deal of research into its use and misuse within the African American community. Such is the subject that medical scholar Harriet Washington explores in her book *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*.\(^{216}\) The book reveals the hidden underbelly of scientific research and the roots of the African-American health deficit. It also examines less well-known abuses and looks at unethical practices and mistreatment of blacks that are still taking place in the medical establishment today. A new report by the American Cancer society shows that African-Americans are still more likely than any other group to develop and die of cancer. The study states that socio-economic factors play the largest role in this disparity – African

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\(^{214}\) Mitchem, “Jesus is my Doctor”, 285-7.


Americans have less access to health care and information, and are less likely to get screening and medical treatment.  

Yet the marginalization of black people resulted in spaces or locations where they have been able to recreate themselves, to employ agency, and to affect their communities. There is a long tradition of healing arts in the black community. Practitioners of folk medicine, conjure, root work, and faith healing have accumulated and communicated their knowledge across the generations. How not to stunt the growth of a child, cures for acne, morning sickness, headaches, nosebleeds, birth control. The well-being of individual bodies intersects with the well-being of families and communities. I would maintain that this constitutes the background or the context in which we encounter Valeria – a context of illness/disease and its treatment, which is highly charged for many in the African American community.

Valeria’s encounter with illness is that of another oppressor, an enemy, as that which is an assault on her. In the religious experience of healing, there are encounters with an “other” or “Other,” her pastor and/or God. As far as her consciousness is concerned, there is a corrective given in this encounter. She is an “I”: a person, a child of God. She is also part of a “we”: the congregation, the Church. As far as the other that is the minister, this is an “other” that she perceives as open and affirming of her as an “I.” With respect to her subjectivity, there is not the veil or consciousness of herself as a third

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217 An especially vivid example of such supposed exploitation, to which Washington refers throughout the book, is the work of Dr. J. Marion Sims, a mid-nineteenth-century Alabama surgeon who developed the first successful technique for the repair of obstetric or vaginal fistulae who is considered the father of American gynecology. In afflicted women, the condition is marked by pain, disfigurement, and chronic infection, as well as by the continuous leakage of urine.

In the years 1845-49, Sims conducted experimental operations on slave women brought to him for treatment by their owners. He did not use anesthesia on them during surgery and yet, curiously, gave them opium over the course of their recoveries. “The most logical explanation” for this drug regimen, Washington writes, “had more to do with controlling the women’s behavior than controlling their pain, because the addiction weakened their will to resist repeated procedures.”
person. The racialized fracturing is not present, so the healing is one of consciousness, of self. The affirming “other” in this situation is not engaged in racialization, because the other is not signifying her and she is not signifying herself as other than an “I.”

With respect to her daily practice, again, there is the continued constitution of herself as an “I.” Specifically, the oil of anointing that she administers daily is from her community; it is blessed by the ministers of healing. There is the affirmation of herself with the application of the consecrated oil. In addition, this practice is accompanied by prayer, in which she encounters an “Other,” before which she is accepted as an “I,” as a subject. This is indeed an act of healing, in that fragmentation is momentarily rectified. There is unity of the complex self. There is wholeness here as an “I”.

**Conclusion**

As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, the goal was to present phenomenological descriptions of case studies or examples of African American religious experience. This phenomenological rendering will provide the data upon which the theories and methodologies associated with an African American hermeneutics of liberation – what I have characterized as a dominant posture among African American religionists (particularly those in theology, ethics, and philosophy of religion) – as well as those associated with theories and methods of the “everyday” will be applied and contrasted in Chapter 5. In so doing, it is my assertion that the approach informed by studies of the quotidian will render a more compelling and robust explanation and interpretation of African American religious experience than those utilized by African American religionists. The failing of the latter will rest on their inability to deal
effectively with the heterological nature of African American experience, which is made apparent on the level of the microscopic as opposed to the macroscopic perspective, and normative and essentialist views associated with the dominant paradigm.
Chapter 3 – Current Approaches to the Study of African American Religious Experience

Introduction

In this chapter, “Current Approaches to the Study of African American Religious Experience,” I shall turn my attention to African American religionists’ exploration of the nature and meaning of African American religious experience. As I stated in the introduction to this dissertation, the central problem that has beleaguered and invigorated my intellectual curiosity to date involves the nature of African American religious experience. What is one to make of the diverse and varied experiences of God or the Divine among African Americans? For example, in the African American Christianity of the historic Black Church, God is experienced as the one who is there “in the midnight hour” and the one who “makes a way out of no way.” Concurrently, other African American religious traditions experience a God that is remote, idle, or irrelevant, at least with respect to the affairs of humanity. In the language of comparative religionists, these later experiences are associated with a *deus abscondus* or *deus otiosus*. How does one assess such religious experiences? Are such religious experiences, associated with a people who for much of their collective history could be counted among the poor, the oppressed, and the dispossessed in this country, at best palliatives or prophylactics and at worst, forms of psychosis or props for oppression? I assert that such questions should be of paramount concern for those religious scholars that profess to take the lived experience of the African Americans seriously.

218 *Un dieu lointain et oisif* – often used in reference to the concept of the High God in West African traditions, such as Olorun or Olodumare in Yoruba traditional religion or Onyame in Akan traditional religion and their new world incarnations such as Vodun, Santeria, and Candomble.
In a fashion similar to that in Chapter 1, I shall provide a brief overview of the manner in which African American religionists have attempted to describe, interpret, analyze, and explain African American religious experience, particularly from the perspective of African American theological discourse, particularly as it has been associated with Black and Womanist Theologies of Liberation. Through a review of the literature, I will show that schematizations of African American religious experience associated with these traditions, despite protestations to the contrary, actually share many of the same theoretical assumptions as well as those prevailing traditions in North Atlantic theologies (Anglo-American and European) that they purport to criticize. Subsequently, I will reveal what I believe to be the major shortcomings of African American religionists’ engagement and analysis of religious experience, particularly as they relate to the overwhelming concern with collective transformation – macroscopic liberation - of African Americans over against “everyday” practices on the individual level.219

Historic Approaches to the Study of African American Religious Experience

Prior to the last half of the twentieth century, the study of religion and religious experience in the African American community was most closely associated with disciplines such as history and sociology. Moreover, these early studies were almost exclusively concerned with the study of the Black Church. Narrowly construed, the nomenclature “the Black Church” refers to such historic black denominations as the

219 With respect to a number of these positions, there are normative claims, e.g., Christian notions of salvation, at play, which I attempt to overcome in my methodology. This will be discussed in detail when dealing with the shortcoming of the African American religionist scholarship to date at the end of this chapter.
African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Colored (Christian) Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., the National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Baptist Convention, and the Church of God in Christ. However, "the Black Church" is also a kind of sociological and theological shorthand for the pluralism of the African American Christian community in the United States. As such, the "Black Church" might be conceived of as a heuristic device or may be deployed along the lines of entities possessing Wittgensteinian family resemblance (Familienähnlichkeit).

Study of the Black Church, which prior to the 1960's was often referred to as the Negro Church, has been carried out by such renowned African American intellectuals as William Edward Burghardt Du Bois's *The Negro Church*, Carter Godwin Woodson's *The History of the Negro Church*, Benjamin Elijah Mays and Joseph William Nicholson's *The Negro's Church*, and Edward Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Church in America*. Substantive work of more recent vintage would include that of Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* and *A Fire in the Bones*, Gayraud S. Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An*

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Interpretation of the Religious History of African American, and C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya’s The Black Church in the African American Experience.

That such a state of affairs should obtain is not that odd, however, for without question that Black Church had been and continues to be the dominant and most significant historical, cultural, and social expression of the religious consciousness of African American people.

A few texts of note that look to examine the African American religious legacy outside of expressions of Christianity include Arthur Fauset’s Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North, which is predicated on his anthropological field work among black religious groups in Philadelphia in the early 1940. This work was particularly ground breaking in its attentiveness to sects such as that of Bishop Charles (Daddy) Grace and his United House of Prayer for All People; Prophet William Saunders Crowdy’s Church of God and Saints of Christ, a Black Hebrew Israelite community; the Noble (Timothy) Drew Ali’s The Moorish Science Temple, and

229 Lincoln and Mamiya, The Black Church in the African American Experience
230 In fact, it is often assumed, in the words of Joseph R. Washington, Jr.

In the beginning was the black church, and the black church was the black community. The black church was in the beginning with the black people; all things were made through the black church, and without the black church was not anything made that was made. In the church was life, and the life was the light of black people. The black church still shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Father Divine's (George Baker) International Peace Movement. Another is C. Eric Lincoln's *The Black Muslims in America*\(^{232}\) study of the Nation of Islam.

Beginning around the middle of the twentieth century, however, there was a significant theoretical and methodological shift from sociological and historical modes of inquiry of African American religion and religious experience, to theological, hermeneutical, and philosophical methodologies, and it is to this approach that I will now turn.

**James Cone, Father of Black Theology**

With texts such as *Black Theology and Black Power*\(^{233}\) and *A Black Theology of Liberation*\(^{234}\), the scholarship of James Hal Cone has served as a catalyst for much contemporary African American religious scholarship. In these works, Cone applies the Christian gospel to the struggle of blacks in America. In so doing, he comes to identity the liberation of the oppressed with the gospel of Jesus, and thus proclaims that Christian theology is "black theology." Indeed, in *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone states, "Christianity is not alien to Black Power; it is Black Power."\(^{235}\) According to Cone, it was his want to bring this to the awareness of the black community in the hopes of providing theological justification for the fight for civil and human rights of the oppressed "by any means necessary." In viewing God as on the side of the oppressed, Cone states,

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\(^{235}\) Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 38.
“God in Christ has revealed himself as a God whose righteousness is inseparable from the weak and helpless in human society. The goal of Black theology is to interpret God’s activity as he is related to the oppressed black community.”  
Cone begins his analysis of the content of black theology by explaining its significance and application to the black community. He explicitly states that “there is only one principle which guides the thinking and action of Black theology: an unqualified commitment to the black community as that community seeks to define its existence in the light of God’s liberating work in the world.” Cone identifies black theology as an articulation of the “theological self-determination of black people.” In its application to the black community, black theology becomes a survival theology. Cone points out that the central question for black people is “how are we going to survive in a world which deems black humanity as an illegitimate form of human existence?” Thus, God “has made a decision about the black condition. He has chosen to make the black condition his condition! It is a continuation of his incarnation in twentieth-century America.” Cone subsequently maintains that black theology provides the African American community with theological principles that justify action in the black revolutionary struggle. 

In developing his theology, Cone identifies the several sources: black history and black culture, as well as revelation, scripture, and tradition. However, the primary source for black theology is black experience. It is this source, he maintains, which dictates that the norm and hermeneutical principle for engaging all other sources must be the liberation of black people. – in the light of black experience – Jesus Christ. Thus, “the

236 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 5.
237 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 10.
238 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 10
239 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 11.
240 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 12.
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."  

While insistent about black experience as the context for theological reflection, Cone goes affirm the centrality of the Christ, noting, however, that what is most important for blacks is what "Jesus Christ means when they are confronted with the brutality of white racism." In actual fact, for Cone, the meaning of all revelation is formed and informed for African Americans experience of victimization and oppression, literally and figuratively. In this way, black theology attempts to make sense of black experience. Revelation is "God's self-disclosure to man [sic] in a situation of liberation" where liberation is "emancipation from the political, economic, and social structures of the society...by whatever means black people deem necessary."  

Moreover, black theology's emphasis on revelation provides the black community with the understanding of freedom from the social constructs of a "white" world. Thus, God is not neutral in regards to the black condition. For Cone, God "has chosen blacks as his own...he has decided to make our liberation his own."  

For Cone, this liberative activity is most uniquely revealed in Jesus Christ. Indeed, in relating the life of Jesus Christ to black experience, he ultimately concludes that Christ is black, or in the words of the late Albert Cleage (Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman), Jesus Christ is the "Black Messiah". As the Black Messiah, Christ is present in the

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247 Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968). It should be noted that Cone's understanding of blackness does differ from that of Cleage. For Cleage, blackness is a matter of phenotype. Jesus was a black man, born to a black woman, in order to liberate the black nation Israel. In
midst of the black community’s struggle to achieve liberation in this life as well as a guarantor that “those who have died for freedom have not died in vain, they will see the kingdom of God.” Indeed, according to Cone, “This is precisely the meaning of our Lord’s resurrection, and why we can fight against overwhelming odds. We believe in the future of God, a future that must become present.”

One challenge in dealing with Cone is that he seldom refers explicitly to black or African American religious experience. Rather, he refers simply and frequently to black experience. This leaves the investigator frequently having to infer whether African American religious experience is synonymous with black experience; i.e. that black experience is intrinsically or inherently religious experience, or perhaps that African American religious experience is subsumed under the rubric of black experience. For example, Cone maintains that the black experience cannot be equated with Schleiermacher’s notion of faith as inwardness, an intuition of the infinite, or as a feeling of absolute dependence.

Whatever may be said about the biblical faith and black faith derived from Scripture, neither was based on a feeling of inwardness separated from historical experience. Both Israel and later the black community took history seriously and continued to test the validity of their faith in the context of historical struggle. Indeed, the faith of Israel and of black people was an historical faith, that is, a trust in the faithfulness and loyalty of God in the midst of historical troubles. It was not from introspection,

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Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation,* 141

249 James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed,* Rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997). On page 49, Cone does say the following: “What then is the form and content of black religious thought when viewed in light of black people’s social situation? Briefly, the form of black religious thought is expressed in the style of story and its content is liberation. Black Theology, then, is the story of black people’s struggle for liberation in an extreme situation of oppression. Consequently there is no sharp distinction between thought and practice, worship and theology, because black theological reflections about God occurred in the black struggle of freedom.”
nor from mystical meditation, but from the faithful reading of history that
Israel and later the black community came to believe that the God of the
Exodus and of Jesus was struggling to liberate broken humanity to
wholeness.\textsuperscript{250}

Here it would seem that Cone is referring to the religious dimension of black experience,
i.e. African American religious experience. Elsewhere, Cone goes on to say that the
perspective referred to by Schleiermacher et al. is an indulgence which black people are
not afforded.\textsuperscript{251}

Indeed, Cone refuses the interpreting the message of liberation through the lens
of piety. The proclamations of freedom, liberty, and salvation are events that God will
bring about in history, in materiality.\textsuperscript{252} Indeed, Cone seems to be critical of the
temptation to construe liberation in terms of the psychological or cultural. Thus, in \textit{God
of the Oppressed}, in reflecting on “Who is Jesus Christ for us Today?” says that African
Americans encounter Christ as black “not because of some cultural or psychological need of
black people, but because and only because Christ really enters into our world where
the poor, the despised, and the black are…”\textsuperscript{253} Moreover, Jesus life, death, and
resurrection reveal that God is present in all dimensions of human liberation. Further, the
resurrection event reveals that God’s liberating work is

for all who are enslaved by principalities and powers. The resurrection
conveys hope in God. Nor is this the “hope” that promises a reward in
heaven in order to ease the pain of injustice on earth. Rather it is hope
which focuses on the future in order to make us refuse to tolerate present
inequities. To see the future of God, as revealed in the resurrection of
Jesus, is to see also the contradiction of any earthly injustice with
existence in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{254}

\textsuperscript{250} Cone, \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 91.
\textsuperscript{251} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 24. Indeed, I believe that it is reasonable to maintain that Cone
would also condemn or reject Otto’s “\textit{mysterium tremendum et fascinans},” James’s “religious affections,”
or Eliade’s “hierophantic encounters.”
\textsuperscript{252} Cone, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{253} -----, \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 136.
\textsuperscript{254} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 3-4.
Again, in *God of the Oppressed*, Cone will say

But 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. No matter what happens to us in this world, God has already given us a perspective on humanity that cannot be taken away with guns and bullets. Therefore, to William Jones’ question, ‘What is the decisive even of liberation?’ We respond: the event of Jesus Christ! He is our Alpha and Omega, the one who died on the cross and was resurrected that we might be free to struggle for the affirmation of black humanity.\(^{255}\)

Finally, Cone explicitly rejects quietism and submissiveness as attributes or characteristics associated with African American religious thought. According to Cone, the idea that Jesus made blacks passive is simply a “misreading of the black religious experience.” He was God’s active presence in their lives, helping them to know that they were not created for bondage but for freedom. Through various cultural and religious expressions, African Americans embraced visions of freedom though they were often bound, dominated, and subjugated.

When everything else in their experiences said that they were nobodies, Jesus entered their experience as a friend and a helper of the weak and the helpless. His presence in the black experience was the decisive liberating event which bestowed dignity upon them. His presence enabled blacks to believe that they were on the “Lord’s journey” despite the historical evidence that said otherwise.\(^{256}\)

Such faith resided and resides for Cone at the center of African American religious experience.\(^{257}\)

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**Black Theology Beyond Cone**

\(^{255}\) Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 177.

\(^{256}\) Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 177.

\(^{257}\) Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 217.
While James Cone is considered by many to be the founder of black theology, there were a number of other significant contributors among that first generation. They include J. Deotis Roberts, Gayraud Wilmore, Cecil Cone, Joseph Washington, Major Jones, William R. Jones, Charles H. Long, Lawrence Neale Jones, Preston Williams, Charles Shelby Rooks, Peter Paris, Vincent Harding, C. Eric Lincoln, and Albert Cleage, to name some but not all who where there at the birthing of this theological tradition. Not all of these persons where theologians. Nor did they all necessarily share the same understanding of African American religious experience as it relates to encounters with oppression and the pursuit of liberation as understood by Cone. Nevertheless, with respect to defining the theological tradition, it would be Cone’s thought that dominated the trajectory of the theological tradition.

There are a number of reasons as to why this would be the case. Firstly, few of the other first generation scholars matched Cone with respect to his productivity in the area of scholarly publications. Also, as the Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, Cone would go on the train most of the African American scholars to receive doctorates in theology over the last four decades in this country. Cones list of students includes Dwight Hopkins, George C. L. Cummings, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, Josiah Young, Dianne M. Stewart, Mark Chapman, Joanne Terrell, etc.

Among this second wave of black theologians, the themes of liberation as constitutive of African American religious experience would continue to be fostered and developed. During this period, there was also a concerted effort to engage African American historical bequest in the form of slave narratives; African American vernacular
culture as expressed in art and music, e.g. the spirituals and the blues, as well as more contemporary cultural products in the form of African American literature. Such projects would expand and provide some level of nuance to black theologies grounding in African American religious experience. Yet, for the most of the scholars engaged in this research, there remained an identification of African American religious experience with conditions of suffering and the pursuit of liberation manifest in substantive social transformation. Yet on occasion, it seemed that Cone, in works such as *The Spirituals and the Blues*²⁵⁸ referred to a deeper level of African American experience that “transcends the tools of ‘objective’ historical research.” According to Cone, “that experience is available only to those who share the spirit and participate in the faith of the people who created these songs… [Thus] to interpret the religious significance of the spiritual for the black community, ‘academic’ tools are not enough. The interpreter must feel the Spirit.”²⁵⁹ While such musings bare a remarkable resemblance to the understanding of the divine, the sacred, and the holy as articulated by the likes of Schleiermacher, Otto, and James; Cone never strayed far from liking African American religious experience to the quest for earthly liberation.

As I have suggested in previous discussion, the concept of heaven in black religion has not been interpreted rightly. Most observers have defined the black religious experience exclusively in terms of slaves longing for heaven, as if that desire was unrelated to their earthly liberation. It has been said that the concept of heaven served as an opiate for black slaves, making for docility and submission…²⁶⁰

Heaven was to be understood as the novum of God’s kingdom still to come. It was “the expectation of the future of God, grounded in the resurrection of Jesus, that was the central theological focus of the black religious

²⁶⁰ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blue*, 78-79.
experience...hope in a radically new future, defined solely by God the Liberator.

Again, it is an oversimplification to characterize all second wave black theologians as possessing a shared or common understanding of liberation as well as African American religious experience. The participants in this movement brought different emphasizes and concerns. Riggins R. Earl in *Dark Symbols, Obscure Sign: God Self, and Community in the Slave Mind*, George C L Cummings with Hopkins in *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives*, and Hopkins in *Shoes That Fit our Feet: Sources of Constructive Black Theology* engage in interpretative studies of slave religion as presented in slave narratives.

Theodore Walker in *Empower the People: Social Ethics for the African American Church* brings his training as an ethicist and commitment to Africentric/Afrocentric thought in an attempt to articulate a vision for the Black Church as radical, new community with a holistic positive vision of relationship among African peoples. In a later work, *Mothership Connections: A Black Atlantic Synthesis of Neoclassical Metaphysics and Black Theology*, Walker joins other African American theologians such as Henry J. Young (Hope in Process: A Theology of Social Pluralism) and Karen Baker-Fletcher (*My Sister, My Brother : Womanist and Xodus God-Talk, Dancing with...*)

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God: The Trinity from a Womanist Perspective, Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation, and Monica Coleman (Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology) who count among a number of African American scholars influenced by the philosophical tradition of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne known as process philosophy or neoclassical metaphysics. Such scholars find the ideas of ultimate reality understood in terms of becoming, unfolding, and growth coherent with the African American experience of struggle in pursuit of liberation and freedom.

Finally, one would be derelict in omitting the work of Cornel West. In Prophesy Deliverance: An African American Revolutionary Christianity, Cornel West proffers an African American philosophy which takes seriously the “Afro-American experience.” As he states in his preface, this philosophy proposes its own cultural roots and socio-political realities as its domain of inquiry. Such philosophy is not created solely to be the purview of the academy, but rather to offer those engaged in the struggle for African American liberation vital tools of analysis that also informs a meaningful and potentially effective praxis. Sources for the construction of this Afro-American critical thought are to be evangelical and pietistic Christianity, which West believes to be the most influential and enduring African American intellectual tradition, and American pragmatism. Further,

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270 Eulalio R. Baltazar, a professor of philosophy at the University of the District of Columbia, Washington, The Dark Center: A Process Theology of Blackness, might also be included in this list. His thought differs from that of the others in this list, however, as it is influenced more by the thought of Teilhard de Chardin.

271 West, Prophesy Deliverance, 11.
when such thought is open to a dialogical encounter with progressive Marxism, West sees the possibility for a truly revolutionary Christian perspective and praxis.

**Womanist Theology**

Perhaps the most significant movement associated with second generation black theology has been womanist theological discourse. As a distinct discipline, womanist theology differs from North Atlantic, black, and feminist theologies in its emphasis on the lives of African American women. It is the contention of womanist theologians that African American women possess a deep and sophisticated religiosity that has largely been ignored. These religious scholars go on to assert that such experiences are tremendous resources for those attempting to construct a theology of liberation for oppressed people in general, and African American women in particular.

Womanist theology reports as a primary source the lives and voices of ordinary Black women. In response to the question, “What does it mean to be a Black woman in the United States?” womanist scholars maintain that principally it is to be oppressed due to race, gender, and socio-economic situation (class). Thus, womanist theology claims to do theology from a “tridimensional experience,” of racism, sexism, and classism.\(^{272}\)

Additionally, African American women are also “entrapped” by definitions of what it means to be a woman; definitions that historically excluded them while simultaneous purporting to be normative. In addition, black women have been saddled with notions of martyrdom and self-sacrifice. Womanist theology attempts to redress the offenses perpetrated against black women.

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However, womanist theology, like black theology, defines itself as a liberation theology. As each liberation theology speaks to the particular realities of a group of people who have been silenced, womanist theology attempts to do this with respect to black women. As such, it is informed by the “ordinary theologies” of black women rooted in their spirituality and faith. These “ordinary theologies” encompass concepts and practices of black women, and reflect black women’s comments to one another, especially motherhood and sisterhood; to family; and to community.

The term womanist is beholden to the author/activist Alice Walker. According to Walker, it is derived from the black folk term “womanish” that connotes a spirit of independence, strength, but also impertinence and ‘sass’.  

According to Stephanie Mitchem in *Introducing Womanist Theology*, womanist theology is rooted in ethics. Mitchem goes on to say that womanist theology and ethics are

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Womanist

1. from *womanish*. (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist of feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “god” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. *Serious*.

2. *Also:* A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in: “Mama, why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige and black?”

Ans.: “Well you now the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”


4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

– often written in the form of a neologism, “theoethical” - relies upon a variety of tools from history, ethnography, literary criticism, sociology, economics, etc. in order to explore the “rich textures and gifts” of African American women’s religious lives.

Similarly, Stacey Floyd-Thomas in *Mining the Motherlode* identifies womanist religious scholarship with a methodological system of ethics. In so doing, Floyd-Thomas proffers four tenets of the womanist tradition: radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love, and critical engagement. Floyd-Thomas also affirms that womanist religious thought utilizes a combination of interdisciplinary methodologies; e.g., literary analysis, sociological analysis, and historiography.

Recounting the history of womanist theology, the roots seem to be most closely aligned with essays of Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams and Toinette Eugene in the late 70’s/ early 80’s as the beginning of the discipline. These earliest works did not deploy the term womanist. It would not be until 1987 that the term was used by Williams in an essay for *Christianity and Crisis*. Their work, however, would be followed by “signal texts” of ethicist Katie Canon’s *Black Womanist Ethics*, biblical scholar Renita Weems’s *Just a Sister Away*, and theologian Jacquelyn Grant’s *White Women’s Christ, Black Women’s Jesus* (1989). The 1990s would see more contributions from Emilie Townes, Marcia Mitchem, and Marcia Mitchem ascribes the coining of this term to Joan Martin. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Mining the Motherlode: Methods in Womanist Ethics* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006). See also ———, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, Religion, Race, and Ethnicity (New York: New York University Press, 2006).


Riggs, Joan Martin, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes among others. The 90’s would also see the publication of Delores Williams’s *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk.*

Built upon African American women’s traditions of networking and commitment to community, womanists engage black and white feminists, Afrocentrists, black male theologians, members of churches, students, and women across the African Diaspora. In so doing, womanists also generate novel approaches to theological categories such as redemption, salvation, Christology, the nature of God, and the Bible, and personhood. Womanist theologians also face new challenges in their exploration of pastoral and ecclesiological matters, ecumenical dialogue, traditional African religions, sexuality, ethnography, and art.

**Outliers**

It should be noted that there are those who I would characterize as somewhat outliers to the liberation tradition and yet are still associated with the black theological

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tradition, broadly construed. With respect to those involved associated with the first
generation scholars, I proffer William R. Jones and Charles H. Long as the most
significant and compelling. William R. Jones's *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to
Black Theology*. For Jones, the first question that must be addressed by any theology
that purports to be about liberation has to do with the *why* of suffering. It is Jones
contention, however, that attempts to answer this question by black theologians has been
seriously flawed due to an unexamined presupposition about the benevolence of the
divine. Jones asserts that the inability or unwillingness to examine this presupposition,
which Jones refers to as the possibility of divine racism, results in numerous
contradictions within then extant forms of black theology. Black theologians "beg the
question" by asserting that God is on the side of black people without substantiating this
assertion.

In the case of Charles H. Long, the principal African American religionist
associated with the field history of religions the theological enterprise in itself is flawed.
In his seminal work, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of
Religion*, Long attempts to address what constitutes religion and thus the study of
religion. Long asserts that religion is an "orientation – orientation in the ultimate sense,
that is how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one's place in the
world." Thus, the scientific study of religion involves an exploration of this pursuit for
ultimate orientation, the quest for the meaning of human experience. This is achieved

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through the appropriation of the hermeneutical tradition associated with the history of religions.

Among second generation outliers, one of the most compelling is Delores Williams in her seminal text, *Sisters in the Wilderness*. There she proffers that the meaning of black religion is primarily about survival and quality of life. It is not Jesus’s resurrection for her, which is imperative, but rather his ministry to the disinhaerited and dispossessed. Others among this number would include the likes of Theophus Smith, Victor Anderson, and Anthony B. Pinn, to name just a few of the most prominent.

**Conclusion**

As stated in the introduction of this dissertation, it is my primary contention that the theoretical assumptions and methodological tools deployed by African American religionists fail in their attempt to grasp the breadth and complexity of African American religious experience, broadly construed. One of the challenges with respect to those engaged in the study of African American religion is that much of the scholarship has been done from a perspective that assumes Christian normativity. This is particularly true of the work of many – if not most - Black and womanist theologians. Of even greater concern for my line of argumentation in this work, however, is the assertion that *African American religious experience* is solely comprised of or synonymous with a metanarrative of cosmic liberation or deliverance, whether it is of divine or human origin.

The desire to interpret African American religious experience in terms of macroscopic liberation is quite understandable given their history. Moreover, I would assert that relentless emphasis on black religious experience in terms of struggle for
liberation is motivated by a desire to deny succor to expressions of black religion
associated with quietism and submissiveness that are susceptible to the critiques
proffered by various detractors who view religion as intrinsically ruinous and harmful.
Indeed, I find myself in agreement with Anthony B. Pinn when he states in *Terror and
Triumph* that an understanding of religion as historical manifestation of a struggle for
liberation embedded in culture does not fully capture the nature and meaning of black
religion.\(^{293}\)

Thus, in the next chapter, I will explore theories and methods that might open new
horizons of meaning and understanding for African American religious experience, while
at the same time allowing it to maintain a point of identity with the moral imperatives
associated with other understandings of African American religious experience,
particularly those associated with black theology.

2003), 157
Introduction

In Chapter 3, it was my intention to lay the foundation for a theoretical and methodological approach to the study of African American religious experience that emphasizes the lived “everyday” experiences of black folk in its complexity, subtlety, ambiguity, and ordinariness. In so doing, I will call upon a myriad of resources within a multifaceted and varied intellectual lineage. Contributions to the peculiar genealogy come from philosophers, historians, sociologists, artists, and members of the literati (e.g., personages as varied as Martin Heidegger, Maurice Blanchot, George Perec, Theodore Adorno, Henri Lefebvre, and Michel de Certeau). I do not assume, however, linearity and a coherent trajectory of thought among these individuals. Rather, I understand the nature of the various associations to be much more rhizomorphic.

I will begin with a kind of description of the concept of the everyday. From there I will flesh out what I believe to be a unique relationship between the everyday and religion, particularly religious experience. As one will recall, I conclude the first chapter stipulating the following definition of religious experience: *a religious experience is best defined as any experience (understood as an event that one lives through either as a participant or an observer and about which one is conscious or aware) in which what is experienced by the person is taken to be an encounter with the “real” or “true.” Depending on one’s tradition, this is may be referred to as God (a representative of God, or other theophanies), Nature, the Ground, the Ultimate, the Infinite, or the self.*
In this chapter, I will show that the everyday is a significant, if not the most important, milieu upon which to concentrate in order to understand, analyze, and explain the religious as it relates to lived experience.

Following such preliminaries, I frame the conversation of everyday life in terms of an analysis of power, understood in terms of the agonistic relationship of autonomous and heteronomous forces constitutive of human beingness. This establishes a foundation for developing a genealogy of everyday theorists, calling attention to aspects of their thought I believe to be the most insightful and the most penetrating with respect to the particular phenomena that I am addressing, the phenomena associated with African American religious experience.

The chapter will conclude by addressing some of the challenges in deploying such theories of the everyday, particularly regarding how encompassing is the concept of everydayness. Certainly, the theorists to whom I refer do not have in mind the social lives of African Americans. Their referents and data are drawn in most instances from Europeans and their theories applied in a European context. Part of the objective of my investigation, therefore, is to show that these theories can be used because they address issues that are common to human experience in different contexts, and do so in a manner that is rich and adaptable, and thus may facilitate a more robust understanding of African

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294 There are exceptions to this. For example, Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of practice originate from his study of various indigenous peoples in Algeria. Likewise, Michel de Certeau spent a considerable amount of time between 1966 and 1968, as well as frequent stays in subsequent years, in Latin America, particularly Brazil and Mexico. De Certeau was drawn to the burgeoning liberation theology and the commitment of priests, a number of whom were fellow Jesuits, who stood with the poor over against the powers of state and church. According to Natalie Zemon Davis, de Certeau was impressed with the forms of popular spirituality, “seeing in these messianic and ecstatic movements not aberrant behavior that had to be stamped out by the Church, but ‘the inner voice of a continent still culturally Catholic.’” (“The Quest of Michel de Certeau,” The New York Review of Books, volume 55, number 8 • (May 15, 2008). Further, anthropologists in their engagement of non-Western cultures have deployed the work of some of these theorists. However, their discourses were seldom structured specifically around the concept of the everyday, and they did not do so for the purpose of examining religious experience.
American religious experience than that associated with what I have referred to as the dominant interpretive model in African American religion; i.e., a hermeneutics of liberation.

It is my contention that with an emphasis on forms of power that are macroscopic, often monolithic, and hierarchical, the dominant paradigm within African American religious thought has given markedly less “attention power” at the level of the microscopic; e.g., the microphysics of power, as represented in the micro and biopolitical. The term “microphysics of power,” as I deploy the phrase, is most closely associated with the work of the historian, philosopher, and sociologist Michel Foucault. As will become readily apparent in the genealogical presentation related to the theories of the everyday, I am particularly indebted to the thought of de Certeau, characterizing his thought as the pinnacle of this intellectual tradition.

**What do I mean by the everyday?**

What is meant by the study of everyday life, or for that matter, by the “everyday”? Firstly, I maintain that it is an error to assume that there is *one* “everyday” or definition of “everyday life”. For some, the everyday might best be described as the mindless, disengaged happenstance of the world, of some plenum, against which life shows up. In this respect, the everyday is at once associated with the most familiar and intimate aspects of our lives, while at the same time the most foreign, alien, or peculiar. Moreover, it is that which is routinely overlooked and missed. If an account of it is given, it is often categorized as the mundane, the banal, or the ordinary. In the introduction to *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, Ben Highmore refers to the many “guises” of
everyday life, and several other terms used by various scholars to refer to a similar
phenomenon include: *Alltagsleben, la vie quotidienne, lo cotidiano*, run of the mill and so
on. As such, I would argue that everyday life is at once the most prevalent way of human
being and yet, the least present or accessible to us. The everyday consists of a myriad of
experiences that people have, but which they may ignore for a various reasons that may
be intentional or not. Once more, the everyday consists of the unremarkable, the habitual
routines of “ordinary life.” Thus, the everyday is simultaneously that which is most
immediate and most elusive. Phenomenally, one might say that the everyday is always
receding, always escaping from us.

The realm of the everyday and everyday life became the subject of investigation
and reflection among various scholars and intellectuals during the latter part of the
nineteenth and the first part of the twentieth century. For the most part, their interest was
associated with what they perceived to be a radical transformation of human societies
associated with modernity. While the transition to modernity brought numerous
benefits, it also created other problems, at the top of the list being the fact that our
understanding of what it means to be a human being who experiences life in an “ordinary
way” has changed. One arena in which this was the case, and that has been the subject of
scrutiny among various scholars and social critics, is the transmutation of time. It is the

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295 This too, is something that makes it of relevance for any discourse with respect to African American
life. As noted by Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! : An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, 1st
ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1982), African Americans were born in modernity, with their
very beings being the substrates on which various discourses attempted to etch themselves. Charles H.
Long characterizes this state of affairs in terms of Africans in America being the product of a “second
creation,” a phrase he coins for the signification of Africans by Europeans, and perhaps a more poignant
and expressive way of describing what he also refers to as “being othered.” A similar observation is also in
Paul Gilroy’s, *The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Gilroy and other cultural and
postcolonial scholars have noted that the discourses constructed as to the constitution of humanity during
the Enlightenment and birth of modernity had devastating impact on non-Western, non-European peoples,
who became the embodiment of that which was “other.”
scholars’ contention that time is one of the main victims of modernity, being effectively emptied of its meaning. With the development of the mechanical clock, the assembly line, and mass transportation of goods as well as people, the experience of time has undergone a mutation. Time – which previously was experienced as possessing ebbs and flows, of moving swiftly in one instance and almost standing still at another – has become homogenized, consistent, and uniform. The use of technology to increase productivity and efficiency became of greater import than creativity, and became more important than one’s intimate and immanent relationship with the order of things: family, community, and the gods.

Two commentators on such changes were Karl Marx and Max Weber. According to Marx, modernity (as identified with the industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism) brought into being “[t]he miserable routine of endless drudgery and toil in which the same mechanical process is gone through over and over again, like the torture of Sisyphus; the burden of toil, like the rock, is ever falling back upon the worn-out drudge.”\(^\text{296}\) Weber will refer to the “iron cage” of bureaucratic rationality.\(^\text{297}\) Weber’s ‘iron cage’ is everyday modernity as machine-like and bureaucratic. It is an everyday life governed by asceticism.\(^\text{298}\) Yet, to see everyday modernity as boring or relentlessly routinized is to capture only one side of its general articulation. Alongside this, and overlapping with it, is the everyday as mystery. Writing about the ethnological


\(^{298}\) Weber, “The Protestant Ethic,” 181. “For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into *everyday life,* and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which today determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.”
orientation, Nancy Bentley comments that the mysterious and banal intersect in the thought of Durkheim, Marx, and Freud.

It is hard to overlook the fact that the writings of these three thinkers, for all their rational mastery, helped to make strange and almost unfathomable the territories of self and society that are usually the most familiar to us from everyday life. A certain irony obtains: ethnological analysis always makes partly alien what it masters.  

A similar point is made by Johannes Fabian in his book *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object.*

In this work, he comments on the anthropologist’s or ethnographer’s practice of setting distance between the researcher and the people that he or she is researching. Fabian’s specific concern is anthropology’s creation of representations that placed the “other” outside the flow of time. Fabian offers the ethnographic portrayal of “coevalness” as a solution to this problem. For Fabian, the relationship of anthropology to its subject has always been organized in significant correlations of oppositions (such as here/there and now/then), which he associates with part of a distancing strategy/tactic between subject and object of ethnographic practice that he sees as the production of distance between “the West” and “Others.” He notes that once there was the prevalent tendency of referring to “the Other” in relation to an evolutionary temporal axis with the locus of the ethnographer or anthropologist invariably being the more advanced. He also notes the structuralist tendency to categorize cultures “synchronically” as opposed to “diachronically.” Fabian refers to such approaches as exhibiting an “encapsulating of time.” According to Fabian, this involves the denial of coevalness; i.e., “the systematic and persistent tendency to place the

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referent(s) of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of the anthropological discourse.”

Subsequently, what is now called for is a kind of reversal or corrective of the normative gaze within modernity. In the contemporary context, analysts must take into consideration the insights of Ben Highmore when he asserts, “[I]t is the ability of ‘making strange’ within a culture of rationalism and of finding the strange within everyday life that is central to this study of everyday life and cultural theory.”

Unfortunately, though the nature and substance of the everyday has been a subject of scholarly inquiry, there persists a tendency within contemporary letters to relegate the “everyday” to the margins, to consign it to the domain of the incoherent, the insignificant – indeed, as a particular kind of ganz anderen.

How then does one attempt to make “everyday life” vivid and apparent, a kind of everyday life that is characterized by ambiguities, instabilities, and equivocation? A cursory glance has one thwarted by an instrumentality and materiality of certain discourses for attending to everyday life that leave as a remainder or as superfluous

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301 Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 3.
303 It is interesting to note that this othering with respect to everyday life, again, recalls the othering of African Americans. Indeed, in Chapter 2 of the *Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy raises the issue of the absence of conversations on race and ethnicity from most contemporary writings on modernity. The irony is that racial slavery was integral to the development of western civilization (42-43). Further, as I have noted in my writings on Hegel and Du Bois specifically, as well as on the concept of race in the continental philosophical tradition, the Negro is relegated to the domain of nature, as opposed to history. This is particularly significant, as history is seen as the realm of spirit, mind, reason, and consciousness. Conversely, nature is the domain of the irrational, of the passions and the emotions. It is for this reason, asserts Hegel, that there have been no significant contributions to human civilization from Africa. Here, Hegel is following the convention of his time, which excises Egypt from the African continent.

With respect to the relationship of “the other” in society and what it reveals about the divine as “Other,” I would refer one to the association made by the eminent historian of religion, Charles Long, in his text *Significations*. With respect to this chapter, I will take up the discussion on the relationship between everyday life and religion in its own section. I would note that the phrase ganz anderen appears in the writing of the 20th century theologian Karl Barth in his reflection about the nature of God. Barth refers to God as the ganz Anderen (Wholly Other) that is also the Holy Other.
precisely that which one desires to make an intent of study. Indeed, theories and methodologies deployed in the study of certain phenomena may, in fact, obscure rather than help to render the everyday. In giving an account of everyday life in this chapter, there will be an emphasis on examining the everyday from a *particular* perspective. This perspective can be described as one that refuses to reduce everyday life to an arena for the reproduction of dominant social relations. While this is an important focus in some of the theorists upon which I, the leitmotif of this chapter is the everyday as a sight of resistance, with resistance understood as essentially a microscopic phenomenon that inheres in all beings.\(^{304}\)

In order to stave off confusion that will undoubtedly arise with my use of the term resistance, and the use or association of the term with the dominant hermeneutical paradigm I associate with much of African American religion, I will offer a preliminary statement of clarification. Indeed, "resistance" will be expounded upon as my investigation of the everyday continues. For now, I will say that the type of resistance of which I speak is not that associated with the intentionality of socio-political movements, although it may serve as a catalyst for such movements. For the most part, it is a phenomenological category such as *donation* or gift. Therefore, it does not represent a particular ethic. Rather it inheres as that which is primordial, an *élan vital*.\(^{305}\)


\(^{305}\) I will say much more about this concept in later chapters. At that time, I will lay out distinctives of my understanding of resistance and how it differs, and is fundamentally different from, resistance associated with a hermeneutics of liberation. This discourse, however, will benefit from first articulating the position of theorists such as Foucault and Bourdieu over against the likes of a de Certeau or an Agamben. Given my penchant for the metaphors associated with the physical sciences, I would refer one to the laws of Newtonian mechanics: (1) a body persists in a state of rest or of uniform motion unless acted upon by an external force — this is conventionally referred to as the law of inertia (2) force equals mass times acceleration (3) whenever a first body exerts a force \(\mathbf{F}\) on a second body, the second body exerts a force \(-\mathbf{F}\) on the first body. \(\mathbf{F}\) and \(-\mathbf{F}\) are equal in magnitude and opposite in direction. The last law is often simply stated that to every action is an equal and opposite reaction; i.e., resistance.
The “Everyday” and Religion

It is my contention that the theories and methods associated with the study of everyday life are uniquely positioned with respect to the study of religion. In the articulation of this position, I am inspired by the work of Charles H. Long in his seminal text *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*. As noted in Chapter 3, Long attempts to address what constitutes religion and thus the study of religion. Long asserts that religion is an “orientation – orientation in the ultimate sense, that is how one comes to terms with the ultimate significance of one’s place in the world.”[^306] Thus, the scientific study of religion involves an exploration of this pursuit for ultimate orientation, the quest for the meaning of human experience.

In his subsequent discourse on African American religious experience, Long proffers a relationship between those persons and cultures that have been “othered” and the sacred as the “Other.” For example, in the essay “Interpretation of Black Religion in America,” Charles Long states that in the oppression and destruction of blacks and indigenous peoples, America has concealed from itself rich and varied expressions of being in the world. Religiously, America has not opened itself to the possibility of the *mysterium tremendum*, only wanting – as it were – to experience the *mysterium fascinans*. Charles Long later associates this with a kind of quintessentially American desire for innocence that is reflected in its valorization of nature and space, and its despising of history and time. On the other hand, the experience of the absurd, the opacity of the real, and the tragic view of life, as well as the experience of utopian and eschatological hope, has been present in the experiences of the oppressed.[^307] It is for this

reason that Long values the contribution of theologies opaque — e.g., black and liberation theologies — for they bear witness to other experiences of the sacred and thus subsequently provide for a fuller understanding of that which is constitutive of human beingness. Indeed, in the essay “The Oppressive Elements in Religion and the Religions of the Oppressed,” Long frames his discourse by referring to William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* and Ernst Troeltsch’s *Empiricism and Platonism in the Philosophy of Religion* and their investigation into religious experience. Long maintains that James’s neurological-biological orientation that seeks to explain such occurrences in terms of individual psychology and Troeltsch’s account that is “expressive of the historical situation in which Christians find themselves” are inadequate, particularly in their rendering of the negative or oppressive element of the *mysterium*.

I maintain that Long’s observations of encounters of the status quo with those who have been socially, culturally, and historically othered (e.g., African Americans), as Long goes on in great detail, stating that Black folk were confronted with a reality Impenetrable, definite, subtle, and other — a reality so agonizing that it forced us to give up our innocence while at the same time it sustained us in humor, joy, and promise. It was a quality of experience “which through its harsh discipline destroyed forever a naive innocence, revealing a god of creation” — a god of our silent tears — a god of our weary years. This may be called a ‘nitty-gritty’ pragmatism (138-139).

There are some interesting parallels in Long’s assessment of the experience of the African American and the work of Eddie Glaude and Cornel West, which raises the issue of the tragic in American social life. Long, West, and Glaude see a locus of the tragic present in the experience of African Americans. It is important to note, however, that unlike West or Glaude, Long does not foresee the otherness of black experience being subsumed into the culture; it is his opinion that the resultant tension may be a prerequisite for understanding as it engenders the need for intellectual honesty and humility in the reflection on what it means to be human. Part of this humility for the academy means a reassessment of methodology, particularly the hegemony of Western Christian categories and thought models.

The theologies in question arise from oppressed communities, i.e. communities subject to what Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990) has labeled as the five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.

well as his observation of these people’s encounters of the divine can and indeed promotes understanding with respect to the apprehension of the everyday.

The everyday, as is the case for the holy or the sacred, is perceived as difficult to grasp, as elusive. When one believes that they understand it, or have it, it has the tendency to disappear. Maurice Blanchot notes, “Whatever its other aspects, the everyday has this essential trait: it allows no hold. It escapes.” I would also note that this inability to be grasped, held, seized, or controlled is an important component of the concept of resistance as I use it in the context of the everyday, a use that is distinct from – not simply as a matter of degree or magnitude – the understanding of the concept of resistance associated with the hermeneutics of liberation paradigm.

Moreover, in a comparison of the everyday and the sacred, there is also their relationship with notions of immanence and transcendence. The everyday as well as the sacred are both understood to be present in the midst of the ordinary, or even the banal. Simultaneously, however, the everyday and the sacred are characterized as the exceptional. Both the notion of the everyday and the sacred suggest a desire for something more, for completeness or fullness. It is for this reason that Highmore suggests “everyday life might be the name for the desire of totality in postmodern times.”

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311 There is an interesting aside here that I think is already present in Arendt with respect to the everyday and the relationship of the everyday with the banal and mundane. The connection of banality with the everyday and the sacred has interesting parallels with her notion of the banality of evil. There is something transcendent about evil in some respects. Thus, should one be surprised in the possibility of the banality of the good, or the good life, or liberation. She offers that the mechanism for liberation and freedom and the expression of agency is also the domain of the banal. This is definitely something worth pursuing, either here or elsewhere.
312 Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory: An Introduction.* It must be noted, however, as Highmore himself points out, that the desire to attend to the totality is synonymous with a totalitarian or
As I mentioned in the introduction to the dissertation, however, there has been surprisingly little work done on the concept of everyday life as it relates to experiences of the sacred or the religious. One marked exception is a lecture by Michel Leiris to the College de Sociologie in January 1938, entitled, “Le Sacré Dans La Vie Quotidienne (The Sacred in Everyday Life),” which was eventually published in the journal Nouvelle. He writes,

What, for me, is the sacred? To be more exact: what does my sacred consist of? What objects, places, or occasions awake in me the mixture of fear and attachment, that ambiguous attitude caused by the approach of something simultaneously attractive and dangerous, prestigious and outcast – that combination of respect, desire, and terror that we take as the psychological sign of the sacred?... It is a matter of searching through some of the humblest things, taken from everyday life and located outside of what today makes up the officially sacred (religion, fatherland, and morals).³¹³

Leiris continues by invoking – as sites of the sacred for him in the midst of the everyday – loci such as the stove in his family’s house, his parent’s bedroom, the bathroom toilet, the racecourse, his father’s gun, and various words and names. Thus, in the midst of Weber’s “iron cage” of modernity, Leiris’ experiences of the sacred and everyday life converge in the encounter of stories, myth, superstition, daily rituals, and practices. Several decades later, Foucault will allude to forms of power associated with language and discourses that seek to establish docile bodies within panoptic social structures, institutions, and practices. As I will elucidate to later, experiences of the sacred and everyday life often evince themselves as oppositional phenomena.  

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According to Denis Hollier,

The College of Sociology cast its lot against life that would be exclusively quotidian. It was imperative to escape. The exception, that which eluded dailyness, was deemed sacred. The strength of Leiris’ contribution, indicating how much he has to offer, is summed up in the wording of his title: ‘The Sacred in Everyday Life’ replaces simply antagonism by polemical inclusion.

For Leiris, it seemed that the cultural difference had to collide in a way that couldn’t be managed by the dominant accounts of ‘civilization’ for everyday life to become both vivid and ‘other’. 314

One contemporary scholar who has called attention to the conception of everydayness as it relates to religion (in the Christian tradition particularly) is Charles Taylor. In *The Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, 315 Taylor asserts that to the extent that Christian doctrine prizes dailyness, it is primarily as a sphere where the adherent can display recognition of and obedience to God’s purpose. For example, in the monastic tradition, the structuring of the day around times of prayer suggests a kind of harmony of the daily, mundane, and immanent, with the exceptional and transcendent. 316

Conversely, however, one must recognize a concurrent Christian tradition that associates the daily life with dispersion and distraction, as opposed to the provision of a kind of immediacy to the Divine. Returning to Sheringham, he associates this with Pascal’s notion of divertissement – literally, that the mundane is a kind of diversion. 317

Thus, the everyday is antithetical to the higher realms of religion or the sublime. Where religious observance is part of the fabric of daily life for given groups and individuals,

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314 Bataille and Hollier, *The College of Sociology (1937-39)*, 24. Also, one important aspect of this methodology is the notion of the everyday life as a non-conscious realm. This is a characteristic trait associated with the Surrealist movement. Leiris is a key figure in this, along with the likes of Bataille, whose theory of religion I review in Chapter 1 in regards to his theory of religion as a quest for lost intimacy.


316 Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 70.

faith is generally held to illuminate and transcend the daily round, rather than draw
inspiration from it.

A Genealogy of Everyday Life

*Even the lowest, intrinsically ugly phenomenon can be dissolved into contexts of color and form, feeling and experience, which provide it with significance. To involve ourselves deeply and lovingly with the even most common product, which, would be banal and repulsive in its isolated appearance, enables us to conceive of it, too, as a ray and image of the final unity of all things from which beauty and meaning flow. Every philosophical system, every religion, every moment of our heightened emotional experience searches for symbols, which are appropriate to their expression. If we pursue this possibility of aesthetic appreciation to its final point, we find that there are no essential differences among things. Our worldview turns into aesthetic pantheism. Every point contains within itself the potential of being redeemed to absolute aesthetic importance. To the adequately trained eye the totality of beauty, the complete meaning of the world as a whole, radiates from every single point.*

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I maintain that while extensive genealogies of the quotidian, or everyday life, are worthwhile – indeed, contemporary anthologies like those of Highmore and Sheringham are excellent resources – I wish to call attention to particular ideas. Unlike Highmore, and to a lesser extent Sheringham, I do not hope to avoid a presentation consisting of a heterogeneous mix of divergent interests. Rather, I hope to stress a coherence of the intellectual tradition in a manner that might be beneficial to those wishing to acquire theoretical and methodological tools conducive to the study of religion in general, and African American religion and religious experience in particular. In doing so, however, I


do not mean to suggest a normative view nor some inexorable progression/development leading to a coherent conception of the everyday. Rather, as I have noted at the beginning of this chapter, as a kind of genealogy I am interested in various confluences of influences and inspirations.

One of the challenges to be faced has to do with applicability of rationalism to areas of life that are non-rational. Is such a course navigable, or does the everyday represent a wholly evasive terrain? Further, if the everyday necessarily exceeds attempts to apprehend it, can it be articulated, expressed, or represented, or should all such endeavors be called off or at the very least discouraged? It is perhaps for this reason that everyday life studies exist on the interstices and the gaps between representational categories. Moreover, that this species of phenomenon seemingly resists or circumvents efforts of systemization may be the reason that it is marginalized. Indeed, it presents an aesthetic that questions the suitability of ‘system,’ ‘rigor,’ and ‘logic’ that are very much a part of the modern Weltanschauung.\(^\text{320}\)

*Philosophy for the Non-Philosophical*

One, if not the most significant, challenge which confronts the scholar who wishes to examine and interrogate the everyday has to do with how one goes about describing it. In the phenomenological investigations of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, there is the search or quest for meaning and understanding of the “primordial world” of daily existence, the “sphere of peculiar ownness,”\(^\text{321}\) the everyday and


\(^{321}\) Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, 11th impression. ed. (Dordrecht, The Netherlands, and Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997), 92-99. This is also one of the earliest references that Husserl will make to the concept of the lifeworld in his scholarship.
undifferentiated character of “averageness” (Durchschnittlichkeit), the “public” world, or one’s own closest (domestic) environment, “ontically closest and well-known,” and yet “ontologically the farthest and not known at all.”

Husserl’s phenomenology summoned philosophers to examine the Lebenswelt (lifeworld) – the state of affairs in which the world is experienced, in which the world is lived (erlebt). However, it is precisely the non-theoretical, unconceptual nature of this domain that is problematic for its entry into critical discourse. The lifeworld is the pre-epistemological context, the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity/intersubjectivity of everyday life. However, as such, the lifeworld involves the introduction of the non-philosophical into the domain of the philosophical for it enters philosophical discourse precisely as that which is non-philosophical.

*Martin Heidegger’s Dasein and the Everyday*

That which already shows itself in the appearance as prior to the ‘phenomenon’ as ordinarily understood and as accompanying it in every case, can, even though it thus shows itself unthematically, be brought thematically to show itself; and what thus shows itself in itself . . . will be the ‘phenomena’ of phenomenology.

Beginning with *Being and Time*, Heidegger offers a challenge to the Cartesian tradition of philosophy, particularly with respect to the problem of mind-body dualism. Indeed, Heidegger is in some sense refuting much of the Western philosophical tradition going back to Aristotle, who asserted that the human being was essentially a rational

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323 Heidegger, Macquarrie and Robinson, *Being and Time*, 93 and 69.
animal. Descartes, centuries later, modified Aristotle’s definition, condemning it for its vagueness and imprecision. As a preferable and more rigorous characterization, Descartes asserts that human existence is that of a thinking thing. According to Heidegger, however, this is a fundamental mistake, one that stems in large part to a misunderstanding of the human being in its lived, everydayness. Moreover, despite proffering the concept of lifeworld, the duality is one that persists in the work of his famous teacher, Edmund Husserl.

Most important for my discourse, however, is that Heidegger offers one of the first great analyses of everyday, which, according to Heidegger, is inextricably linked with the very question of being. This does not subsume or circumscribe the extent of Heidegger’s analysis; and, as I will point out, there is an aporia that inheres in Heidegger’s articulation of everyday life. Yet, it is fitting to begin with him, and to note not only his linking of everydayness and beingness in his thought, but also that this ‘being,’ as such, possesses attributes not so dissimilar than those I have already ascribed to everydayness – e.g., ubiquity, elusiveness, and yet self-evidence.

In Being and Time, Heidegger begins with a statement regarding his intention to disclose the meaning of being and he proposes to do this through the phenomenological/ontological examination of the ‘being’ for which the question of being is important. This ‘being’ Heidegger calls Dasein and it becomes readily apparent that by this term, he firstly means ‘human beings.’ Often translated as being-there, or there-being, Heidegger employs the term Dasein because it is his assertion that being-in-the-world is a unitary experience. Being and world are constitutive of one another. Our primordial experience finds us already in the world, already situated in a history, a
culture, a society. Through an existential-ontological analysis of the structure of Dasein in its everydayness of being in the world, he will attempt to discover the meaning of the question of being.

Through his fundamental phenomenology, he explores how the world appears to everyday Dasein. It is here that he talks about the world showing up as equipment, indeed, the world appears as a referential totality of equipment. Thus, for everyday Dasein, things do not show up in terms of a Cartesian duality of subject-object. In lieu of such nomenclature, Heidegger refers to much of what normally appears to Dasein in the world as ready-to-hand. Again, the point, according to Heidegger, is that Dasein finds itself always already engaged in the world, engaged in projects and tasks, to which Heidegger refers in his unique vocabulary as “for-the-sake-of-which(s).”

A significant tool that Heidegger deploys in his analysis of Dasein is the concept of moods. Once more, however, one is required to reorient themselves with respect to a phenomenological assessment of moods. For Heidegger, moods are not internal phenomenon. Rather, one encounters moods in the world through a kind of attunement. One of the most important moods that Heidegger will use is Anxiety. Very much in the way that Kierkegaard will use Despair, Anxiety will reveal for Heidegger the essential structure of Dasein. One of the things revealed is what Heidegger refers to as Care, which he will later refer to as Concern. Heidegger will also talk about existential ways of being such as Guilt/Consciousness and “Being unto Death.”

In this move, one is also introduced to the temporal aspects of Dasein. Heidegger refers to Dasein’s being-in-the-world, or Dasein’s everydayness in terms of existence (future/projection), facticity (past/thrownness), and fallenness (present/fallen). With
respect to temporality, it is immediately evident that Heidegger is not referring to "wall clock time," i.e., elapsed time as determined by a chronometer, but rather to human perception or experience of time or how human beings exist in our everydayness. As previously mentioned, Dasein is engaged in projects and tasks, and thus has goals that epitomize a future orientation. At the same time, as Dasein, one is always already situated in a particular culture, at a particular time, and in a particular context that is not of our own genesis; one is thrown into a world that has a past. Finally, much of our everyday existence is one of immersion in the immediate, simply coping and dealing with that which we encounter in the world presently. Interestingly, it is precisely this last way of being where one encounters the aporia to which I previously referred. For it is in the confluence of the present that Heidegger's conception of authentic Dasein and everydayness collide.

Again, one notices in Heidegger a move from the notion of a kind of Cartesian solipsism. Later, the existential phenomenologist Maurice Merleau Ponty will describe human beings as open heads turned towards the world. Such is the nature, the structure of human beingness, of Dasein. The Cartesian way of viewing the world and human beings in the world, which the scientific tradition inherits, in comparison is rather anemic. Indeed, for Heidegger, one has to strip away much of what it is to be a human being before reaching the insipid image of humanity that is the bequest of the dominant Western intellectual tradition. Indeed, Heidegger notes earlier in Being and Time in his analysis of experiencing the world as objective (present-at-hand), that phenomenologically, it is the result of one's relationship with the world breaking down.
If I were to convert this in terms of the language of everydayness, such schematizations are intrinsically limited, as they represent a reified and diminished reality.\textsuperscript{326}

There is, however, a kind of aporia or contradiction in the thought of Heidegger, particularly with respect to his articulation of everydayness, or everyday consciousness, and this is most evident in Heidegger’s conception of authentic (eigentlich). Authenticity, for Heidegger, is Dasein being in the world in such a way that there is genuine human flourishing. The concept of authentic Dasein is indebted to Aristotle’s concept of the phronimos (one who has practical wisdom – phronesis). While everyday existence provides a unique means of access to truth of being for Heidegger, he goes on to present average everydayness as inauthentic and deluded, given that everyday consciousness is non-philosophical and pre-ontological. Stated somewhat differently, while the study of Dasein in its everydayness provides insight into the essential structures of being, as being-in-the-world, everyday consciousness is apt, perhaps even predisposed to turn away from primordial being(ness), and towards inauthenticity.

Thus, Heidegger’s appropriation of the everyday (Alltaglichkeit) is complex. Authentic Dasein is revealed through the everyday, but it is the everyday as inauthentic. According to Sheringham, this is that remnant of the intellectual tradition that Heidegger has imbibed from German romanticism.\textsuperscript{327} I would also note that I believe this may be even more attributable to Heidegger’s theological training, and the ambiguous characterization of everydayness in the Christian tradition. Specifically, there is the Christian doctrine of the fall, which means the world as well as human nature is in need

\textsuperscript{327} Sheringham, \textit{Everyday Life}, 69.
of redemption. Humanity in its unredeemed form, which for Heidegger is also humanity in its non-philosophical and thus non-ontological way of being, is what he will refer to as *Das Man*, “they-selves,” “the They.” Synonymous with Nietzsche’s “herd,” “They” are the antithesis of the philosophical attitude. Yet it is the philosophical attitude that is associated with the move toward authenticity. Indeed, *Dasein* has “fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for Being-its-Self.” With such characterization of everydayness, Heidegger turns aside from everyday consciousness to a critique of that consciousness. Subsequently, his phenomenology becomes opposed to those qualities that are constituent of the quotidian: the aimless, the haphazard, and the arbitrary. Thus, while Heidegger’s schematization may provide a useful starting point for investigations of the everyday, in that it seeks to “express what philosophy otherwise does not find worth speaking about,” one should be wary of his characterization of the everyday as being a mode of “groundless floating” or uncanniness which is uprooted and unattached. Heidegger attempts to establish an “authentic existence” which is not something that is subject to the vicissitudes of “the They.” To counter this, which he attributes to the non-philosophical and the non-thematizable aspects of the everyday, he seems in some respect to be looking for that in the everyday which is able to be regulated or made routine. Thus, while Heidegger does call one’s attention to the “inconspicuous, unobtrusiveness, and non-obstinacy,” he asserts that phenomenology is a way of

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329 Heidegger, Macquarrie, and Robinson, *Being and Time*, 211, 220.
332 Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, 221.
“grasping and explicating phenomena in a way which is original and intuitive,” which is directly opposed to the naïveté of a haphazard, “immediate” and unreflective "beholding."\textsuperscript{334}

Thus, while challenging much of the philosophical tradition, Heidegger is still quite averse to the heterological aspects of the everyday. In the tradition of Hegel, the corporeal, the haphazard, the fleeting, the ephemeral and the unstable have been considered non-philosophical, relegated to Nature, not History.\textsuperscript{335}

\textit{George Perec’s Aesthetics of Everyday Life}

In \textit{L'Infra-ordinaire} George Perec comments on the thematic oblivion of the everyday.

What speaks to us, seemingly, is always the big event, the untoward, the extra-ordinary: the front-page splash, the banner headlines. Railway trains only begin to exist when they are derailed, and the more passengers that are killed, the more the trains exist. Aeroplanes achieve existence only when they are hijacked. The one and only destiny of motor-cars is to drive into plane trees.\textsuperscript{336}

One is instantly stricken by similarities in Perec’s statement and Heidegger’s analysis of “equipment” that is ready-to-hand as distinct from present-at-hand. Like Heidegger, Perec notes that one’s consciousness of everydayness becomes apparent when things break down, when there are breaks and ruptures in the status quo. However, Perec goes farther than Heidegger in his extreme criticism of humanities’ obsession with the

\textsuperscript{334} Heidegger, Macquarrie, and Robinson, \textit{Being and Time}, 61.
\textsuperscript{335} Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arnold V. Miller, and J. N. Findlay, \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit} (Oxford, Oxfordshire, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 86-87. Indeed, Stephen Clucas points out that in Hegel’s \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, “he dismisses the phenomenological totality as a ‘non-being’ which conceals the true essence or true background of things.” “Cultural Phenomenology and the Everyday,”
momentous and the unexpected. In our efforts to attend to the large, the grandiose, or in looking for some immutable, inviolate, essence, Perec notes that the "essential: the truly intolerable, the truly inadmissible" are overlooked.  

What really happens when what we actually live through is ignored? That which occurs each day, and which returns each day — "the banal, the quotidian, the obvious, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual" — how do we render an account of that? How do we interrogate it? How do we describe it?

The problem is, as Perec observes, that we are not accustomed to such interrogations, precisely because we are habituated:

"We don’t question it, it doesn’t question us, it doesn’t seem to pose a problem, we live it without thinking about it, as if it carried within it neither questions nor answers, as if it weren’t the bearer of any information. This is no longer even conditioning, its anaesthesia. We sleep through our lives in a dreamless sleep. But where is our life? Where is our body? Where is our space? How are we to speak of these ‘common things’?"  

Perec suggests that what is needed is an alternative anthropology, an anthropology that would speak about us, which we will help. He refers to such a move as the endotic: an interrogation of the familiar or close examination of the interstitial world that we assume we know, but which is surprising foreign. Such investigations into the

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337 Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, 209.
338 The word itself is a modest enough neologism, easily decipherable as the reverse, or the negative, of "extraordinary," but what in effect did Georges Perec mean by l’infra-ordinaire? In *Approches de quoi? (Approaches to What?)*, a brief text appropriated as the preface to and declaration of intentions of a posthumous little volume published in 1989 and bearing the lower-case title of precisely, *l’infra-ordinaire*.  
341 While the prefix *endo*, which means ‘within’ may appear to refer to the opposite of the *exo*, which means without, is not the case, Perec defined his project as an interrogation of the quotidian: "How can we speak of these ‘common things,’ how, rather, can we stalk them, how can we flush them out, rescue them from the mire in which they remain stuck, how can we give them a meaning, a tongue, so that they are at last able to speak of the way things are, the way we are? Perhaps we must found our own anthropology, one that will speak of us, which will seek out in ourselves what for so long we have plundered from others. No longer the exotic but the endotic." *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, 210.
"background noise" of our existence problematize the ordinary, transforming the overlooked into a series of questions.342

Unlike the phenomenological approach of Heidegger, however, Perec's approach pursues an investigation of the quotidian via aesthetic expression. A contributor to the experimental journal Oulipo, Perec engaged in various forms of experimental writing as well as the making of inventories. According to Stephen Clucas, however, this involved the real risk of "narrativisation of the banal and the trivial risks becoming the banal and the trivial itself."343

_Theodor Adorno's Representation of Everyday Life_

In his _Negative Dialectics_, Theodor Adorno argues for a "changed philosophy" as opposed to a "new anthropology" ala Perec this would achieve "a turn towards nonidentity," a philosophy which would avoid the "concept fetishism" of totalizing systematic philosophies – overcoming the metaphysical "autarky of the concept" by seek[ing] to immerse ourselves in the things that are heterogeneous to [philosophy]...without placing those things in prefabricated categories...adher[ing]...as closely to the heterogeneous as the programs of phenomenology and of Simmel tried in vain to do; our aim is total self-relinquishment. Philosophical contents can only be grasped where philosophy does not impose them. The illusion that it might confine the essence in its finite definitions will have to be given up.344

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344 Theodor W. Adorno, _Negative Dialectics_ (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 13. One of the most subtle and difficult of Adorno's concepts; nonidentity does not simply mean the opposite of identity, that is to say, the non-equivalent, or what doesn't fit into certain categories, which is usually just a metaphor for a different identity which isn't the same as the first identity, but refers to what escapes or eludes every sort of identity, but which nevertheless exists in the shadow of identity, as the transitory reminder or glimpse of unrealized possibilities.
Adorno argued “that our emphatic interest will seek refuge in ephemeral objects not yet overdetermined by intentions....”345 The everyday – as the domain the of the transient, arbitrary and aimless – despite its familiarity, is consistent with this notion of “ephemeral object.” Adorno thus sought a way to allow everyday objects to invade consciousness rather than reducing them to preconceived formal concepts or categories. Adorno believed that it was possible to derive concepts from the objects themselves: “If thought really yielded to the object,” he said, “if its attention were on the object, not on its category, the very objects would start talking under the lingering eye.”346

Interestingly, this idealized conception of the cultural theoretical gaze, the “interpretive eye which sees more in a phenomenon than it is – and solely because of what it is,” is described by Adorno in quasi-religious terms as a “meditative contraction.”347 These contractions would not add up to a system, but would form discrete reflections, a “philosophy in fragment form,” which, despite its partial nature, would allow “conceptions, in the particular, of the totality that is inconceivable as such.” The statements of this philosophy would be truthful to concrete experiences without making transcendental claims. Such thought models would take the “details” that systematic philosophy subordinated to its conceptual machinery, and allow them to enter philosophical discourse “without advance assurance” to the concept. “Not until then,” Adorno argued, “would the steadily misused word of ‘truth as concreteness’ come into its own. It compels our thinking to abide with minutiae. We are not to philosophize about concrete things; we are to philosophize, rather, out of these things.”348

345 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 17.
347 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 28-29.
348 Adorno, Negative Dialectics, 69.
Thus, unlike Heidegger, Adorno endorsed a philosophizing out of that which truly presents itself, or is given. Yet Adorno also notes that such open consideration has no protection against threat of randomness. Adorno states, “Nothing assures it of a saturation with the matter that will suffice to surmount that risk.” Like Perec, Adorno saw the danger of triviality as the price to be paid for a commitment to “open thought.” Also, as a dialectical thinker, unlike Heidegger, the thingness of the everyday constitutes consciousness, but consciousness also phenomenalizes the things of the everyday, constituting them as reality. The thing and consciousness enter into a vertiginous (endless) dialectic.

Further, Adorno’s theoretical vision would suggest the possibility of intense “meditative contractions” centered on the inconspicuous environment, which are drawn from the things themselves and their phenomenal entrance into consciousness. These meditations would be strictly provisional “thought models,” abandoning objects neither to systematic categorization nor to irrationalism, but charting instead the historical becoming of their concrete existence. Yet, with non-categorization and non-conceptuality, there is the problem of representation. Adorno states, “not even extreme empiricism can drag in the facta bruta and present them like cases in anatomy or experiments in physics: no philosophy can pass the particulars into the text.”

Adorno rejects the possibility of an aesthetic solution to conceptualizing the heterogeneous in discourse.

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349 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 70.
351 A philosophy that tried to imitate art, that would turn itself into a work of art, would be expunging itself. It would be postulating the demand for identity, claiming to exhaust its object by endowing its procedure with a supremacy to which the heterogeneous bows a priori. Adorno rejects aesthetic presentation as a modality of non-conceptual investigation (see his criticism of Benjamin’s *Passagenwerk*). There are quotidian researchers, however, who have undertaken aesthetic [Benjamin, Perec].
Henri Lefebvre’s Dialectics of Everyday Life

Like Adorno, Henri Lefebvre, in his *La Vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne* published in 1968, asked whether it was possible to use philosophy as a frame of reference for the study of what it terms the non-philosophical. Lefebvre’s reflection led him to similar questions regarding the representability of the concrete and the quotidian.\(^{352}\) In his project (begun in 1946 and continued periodically through 1968) he sought to make everyday life an object of philosophical reflection.

The everyday with which Lefebvre is obsessed is the everyday of the commodity. Lefebvre observed that life within the constructs of the modern everyday was lived according to the “rhythm of capital.”\(^{353}\) Such adaptations are inextricably linked with the commodification of all life, a theme echoed in the later Heidegger in his observations about life and technology.\(^{354}\) There are also unsurprising affinities in Lefebvre’s thought here and that of Bataille and his understanding of economy in relation to the sacred, which was articulated in Chapter 1. For Lefebvre, the rhythm of capital exists in opposition to everyday life. While there are certainly rhythms associated with everyday life, they are not the rhythms associated with the monotonous or tedious. There are thus different temporalities: the temporalities of modernity, technology, and capital, which Lefebvre associates with linearity, the temporalities of the everyday, which are cyclical times of the cosmic; and the temporalities of biological, to which I would add the sacred.\(^{355}\)


\(^{355}\) Lefebvre, *Critique*, 47.
However, one of the unique features of the everyday for Lefebvre was that within it lay the potential to resist, oppose, or rebuff mechanism of control and the imposition of docility. Indeed, for Lefebvre, the possibility for transformation inheres in the phenomenon of the everyday. As noted by Highmore, “Secreted within the everyday were the elemental demands for everyday life to become something other [by which he means something more] than the bureaucratic and commodified existed imposed by modern or contemporary culture.\(^{356}\)

As a philosopher, Lefebvre asserted that the everyday signaled a speculative attempt to register the social as a totality. In many respects, his work can be interpreted as a continuation of philosophical sociology of Georg Simmel. However, there is also that aspect of the everyday that is frustrated with philosophy as conventionally practiced, as an abstract, rational, systematic discourse. As an alternative, the move to the everyday for Lefebvre is an attempt to connect with the lived actuality of human beingness. Specifically for Lefebvre, this was to take place in the context of the growing consumerism within a modern capitalist society. As a thinker in the Marxist tradition, Lefebvre saw contemporary life as “exploitative, oppressive, and relentlessly controlled.”\(^{357}\) However, from within his dialectical understanding, everyday life possessed the energies to overcome the various aspects of oppression.

This understanding of the everyday will be particularly informative in terms of engagement with everyday life as it relates to African American religious experience. Over against the theories that tend to obfuscate the heterogeneous, for Lefebvre, everyday life was quite simply “lived experience.” Together, modernity and everyday life


\(^{357}\) Highmore, *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*, 114. For example, Highmore notes Lefebvre’s characterization of advertising as a form of terrorism.
constitute a deep structure. An innovative aspect of Lefebvre’s understanding, however, the everyday is both a deep structure as well as the ‘surflux,’ an excess that is left over, unsystematizable, and unschematizable. “It is what is left over after analysis.” In some sense for Lefebvre, the everyday is at the same time too small as well as being too large, too trivial, and impossibly ambitious. For example, Lefebvre refers to those instances of intense experience in everyday life that provide an imminent critique of the everyday as ‘movements.’ Examples of such movements include sensations of disgust, of shock, of delight.

With respect to the relationship of philosophy and everyday, Lefebvre notes, “The limitation of philosophy – truth without reality – always and ever counterbalances the limitations of everyday life – reality without truth.” Thus, philosophy for Lefebvre is primarily a critical tool that can be used in the “attempt to shatter the natural appearance of objects and relations.” As a collection of critical tools, Lefebvre is able to have an eclectic range of references in an effort to displace if not to deconstruct the appeal of the totalization.

In the centenary of Marx’s death Lefebvre reasserts the centrality of everyday life for critical Marxism:

The commodity, the market, the money, with their implacable logic, seizes everyday. The extension of capitalism goes all the way to the slightest details of everyday life... A revolution cannot just change the political

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361 Again, it is important to note that Lefebvre is a dialectical thinker. Thus, in his various critiques of Althusser, Sartre, Foucault, Barthes, et al. the assaults may be extreme, but there is the anticipation that from the assaults that something might be procured, that there is progress
personnel or institutions; it must change la vie quotidienne, which has already been literally colonized by capitalism.\textsuperscript{362}

For Lefebvre, massive social changes are the material from which his critiques of everyday life emerge, with the chief adversary being alienation. For Lefebvre, the possibility for disalienation, by means of which the material and intellectual conditions are created for the gradual disappearance of all forms of alienation, is a potentiality within everyday life.

\textit{Michel De Certeau and the Practice of Everyday Life}

If Lefebvre’s Marxist dialectics brings one to the point of recognizing the everyday as the site of action – as agonistic – Michel de Certeau (influenced by a Foucauldian poststructuralism) posited the everyday as a realm of praxis. Indeed, de Certeau’s main contribution to social theory may be the positing of practice as a ground of resistance to domination. In his seminal work \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}, he states that he is writing “To the ordinary man… a common hero, a ubiquitous character walking in countless thousands on the streets… [an] ambiguous hero. He is the murmuring voice of societies.”\textsuperscript{363} Variously, de Certeau will refer to this figure as an “ordinary man,” a “user,” or even an “active consumer.” He goes on to say that his essay “is part of a continuing investigation of the ways in which users – commonly assumed to be passive and guided by established rules – operate.”\textsuperscript{364} To achieve this, he turns to everyday practices, “ways of operating” or doing things, viewing them not simply as “merely the


\textsuperscript{364} De Certeau, \textit{Practice}, xii.
obscure background of social activity.” De Certeau, then, is focused on investigating the internal logic and utility of those behaviors often dismissed by social theorists: the everyday acts of talking, reading, writing, walking, shopping, and cooking, etc. In these acts, he finds a political dimension. These cannot be described by formal analysis such as statistics. They feature bricolage and poiesis and are characterized by a lack of homogeneity. It is for this reason that de Certeau embraces heterology – the science of the heterogeneous, that which is other, which cannot be systematized, organized, or assimilated. Indeed, I would maintain that de Certeau wants to move away from such constructions as they invariably lead to a totality. In this sense, de Certeau ultimately rejects the major trajectories within modern continental philosophy: the systematized a legacy that is associated with Hegel the organized that might be attributed to the tradition of Heidegger; and the assimilated as the behest of Husserl. In contrast to those who described societies and histories by evoking homogeneities and hegemonies, de Certeau’s emphasis was on the creative and disruptive presence of “the other” – whether it deemed one an outsider, a stranger, a foreigner, or one’s neighbor – in the ever present tensions at the heart of all social life.

De Certeau is interested in the “procedures and ruses” by which people operate within the dominant system to form “the network of an anti-discipline.” In many respects, his project might be seen as a complement and a critique of the work of Foucault, who is also concerned with the microphysics of power. For de Certeau, however, the focus is networks and resources that help people resist and evade the discipline enforced by [unjust] institutions; or rather, the logic of modernity and all that

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365 De Certeau, Practice, xvii.
366 De Certeau, Practice, xv.
conforms to it. De Certeau is somewhat beholden to the earlier work of Pierre Bourdieu with respect to practice. Yet, like Foucault, it is de Certeau’s opinion that Bourdieu’s work masks the agency of the individual, despite his protestations to the contrary.

According to de Certeau, while he agrees that one should focus on practice (namely what people do as opposed to what they might profess to believe or affirm), he believes that Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and *doxa* are “violently imposed truths.” In looking at the social structure of the Kabyle society in Algeria, Bourdieu developed his theory with regard to how people acquire dispositions that result in their functioning and behaving in certain ways they take for granted, of which they are often unconscious. Bourdieu studies how practices facilitate such ways of being. De Certeau believes, however, that Bourdieu’s categories and systematization homogenize the state of affairs. By focusing on social disciplines and practices that lead to *reproduction* of social trends, i.e., conformity, one notes only those forces that are involved in the malleability and mutability of human beings resulting in particular kinds of subjects. However, what of nonconformity, associated with resistance that seems to inhere in human selves?

De Certeau goes on to compare and contrast the works of Foucault and Bourdieu, noting differences as well as similarities. Indeed, he maintains that while together they can be seen to situate a field of research, each acting respectively as an opposing boundary marker, he sees the same operational schema in both, despite engaging different data associated with ostensibly markedly different contexts and locations. De Certeau draws parallels between Foucault’s “panoptic” procedures and Bourdieu’s “strategies.” According to de Certeau, both moves “cut out certain practices from an undefined fabric, in such a way as to treat them as a separate population, forming a coherent whole but foreign to the place in which the theory is produced (Practice, 62). Further, de Certeau maintains that the anomalous, the “aphasic and secret” in both Foucault and Bourdieu, are inverted to substantiate the theoretical panopticism of Foucault and Bourdieu’s theory of the reproduction of the same order everywhere with transgressive “strategies” being absorbed by the *habitus* (Practice, 63).

I was first exposed to this tradition years ago, upon reading Orlando Patterson’s *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse*. His first chapter is entitled “The Tradition of the Sorcerer,” in which he refers to Claude Levi-Strauss, observations on conformists and nonconformists in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1966, pp 13-14). He also refers to Georg Simmel’s essay “The Stranger” in *On Individuality and Social Forms* (Edited D. N. Levin, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1971) as well as to Harold A. Dufree’s commentary on Albert Camus’ *Rebel*: “Albert Camus and the Ethics of Rebellion” in *Journal of Religion*, vol. XXXVIII, no. 1 (1958), p. 35), where he notes “The revolutionary will no longer tolerate the rebel but demands conformity. At this point, the original genius of the rebellious
for this reason that de Certeau adopts a heterological method, for it is his contention that
many everyday practices are ignored, overlooked, left out, dismissed, or deemed
aberrations and anomalous because they resist systematization.

To this end, de Certeau introduces a number of key distinctions by which he seeks
to describe different “logics” of practice.\(^{369}\) It is through such distinctions that he is able
to describe the ways in which the lived experience of persons resists being reduced to the
mere loci or manifestations of a Foucauldian “grid of discipline” that constructs or
constitutes society.

If it is true that the grid of "discipline" is everywhere becoming clearer and
more extensive, it is all the more urgent to discover how an entire society
resists being reduced to it, what popular procedures (also “miniscule” and
quotidian) manipulate the mechanisms of discipline and conform to them
only in order to evade them, and finally, what "ways of operating" form
the counterpart, on the consumer's (or “dominee's”?) side, of the mute
processes that organize the establishment of socioeconomic order.\(^{370}\)

One of de Certeau’s central distinctions is that between strategies and tactics.
Strategies require a ‘proper’ place, which he describes as a regularized, rule-governed,
and institutionalized location. A place of “its own” is distinguishable from its environs.
There must be a break between a place of one’s own and the place of the other.\(^{371}\) In
contrast, tactics are “calculated action[s] determined by the absence of a proper locus” –
they have no proper place of their own, but are always operating within the territory of
the other. It must work in “the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the way of


\(^{370}\) De Certeau, *Practice*, xiv.

\(^{371}\) De Certeau, *Practice*, 34.
surveillance of the proprietary powers... In short, a tactic is the art of the weak.”  
Yet, de Certeau sees strength in this position. Tactics are opportunistic. They involve “clever tricks, knowing how to get away with things, maneuvers.” Whereas a strategy is determined by the establishment of a place of power, a tactic is determined by the seeming absence of power.

Everyday practices, which are clearly aligned with the tactical, are about space. Space “exists when one takes into account vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables.” De Certeau’s most famous example is walking in the city. A city as planned by urban planners is a place, but it is turned into a multitude of spaces by those who walk through it, as they wander from one location to another, often taking various routes to arrive at a particular destination. Space is a practiced place, the site of alteration, memory, story, and mobility.

Though seldom explicit, it is my contention that de Certeau’s heterological methodology and theory of practice obtain with respect to his engagement with religion. Though a French academic and social theorist, he was also a Jesuit priest. This commitment would lead to his study of the origins of the Society of Jesus. A central focus of the study was religious experience in the context of the historical crisis associated with the confrontation between religion and modernity. His most significant

372 De Certeau, *Practice*, 37.
373 De Certeau, *Practice*, 37.
374 De Certeau, *Practice*, xix.
375 De Certeau, *Practice*, 117
376 De Certeau, *Practice*, see especially chapter 7.
works on these matters include *The Mystic Fable: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1995) and *The Possession at Loudon* (2000).\(^{378}\)

In both of these works, de Certeau reads religious practices of the sixteenth and seventeenth century (one a case if mystics and the other a famed case of possession at a French convent) as reactions against specific totalizing discourses (scientific, political, economic, as well as ecclesiastical) spawned by the Enlightenment, each making independent claims to universality. The mystics, then, were reacting to “an ‘explosion’ in the arrangement and use of ‘stable’ elements, a phenomenon of social reinterpretation.”

Succinctly characterized by the theologian Graham Ward, “de Certeau notes that the words of the mystics emerge as one world order gives way to another.”\(^{379}\) As religious experience, notes de Certeau, the expressions and practices of the mystics and the possessed “effect displacements, they attract words and change them.”\(^{380}\) Precisely, they create spaces, breaks, ruptures, and deviations within “the grid of power,” the system of domination. They are assertions and affirmations of agency. The sacral action is marked by distinct “nonconformity” if not transgression. They are, in short, oppositional practices, tactical resistances created by the reaction of a group under siege to oppressive strategies imposed from outside, a situation I read as being not dissimilar to that of black religious experiences in America, which offer alternative social and political practice in a world structured on the Enlightenment and modernity. One could then go on to say that it is this kind of daily practice proposed by de Certeau that one finds in the different parts

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\(^{380}\) De Certeau, *Mystic Fable*, 119.
of daily life and the world slaves created in response to the racial organization of the slave world and its plantation.

Excursus on the Microphysics of Power

Having introduced the thought of Lefebvre and de Certeau, I maintain that a more thorough exploration of what is meant by power on the level of the microscopic, or more specifically the nature of the forces acting on individuals (selves, subjects, or bodies) and their properties is needed; i.e., the “microphysics of power.” The nomenclature, “microphysics of power” is perhaps most closely associated with the scholarship of the late French historian, philosopher, and social scientist, Michel Foucault. The concept arises in his analytics of power in works such as Discipline and Punish. In this work, Foucault begins to examine forms of power used in the shaping or construction of subjects. Such power, according to Foucault, is capillary, it is ubiquitous, and can be characterized as a network, web, or as a grid. Moreover, it is constitutive of society. As such, it is simultaneously systemic (macroscopic) as well as everyday (microscopic). Such power is often quite subtle and at times goes unnoticed because it is associated with the dominant discourses and systems of knowledge that one often takes for granted.

In introducing Foucault, it is important to remember that as a radical thinker, Foucault sought to critique the dominant paradigms within society, initially through the interrogation of various institutions such as schools, prisons, and psychiatric facilities. For Foucault, “history” could be described as inherently contentious, and as such, there are no bare facts in history that are discrete, that are not embedded, formed, and informed

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by social, cultural, and biological/organic factors. Indeed, Foucault avoids the term history because in the context of the West it is synonymous with a continuous, linear, and progressive narrative. Like Nietzsche, he uses the terms archaeology and genealogy, which are generally more rhizomorphic.

Foucault also engages in the reversal of perspective. He chooses not to write from the position of the elite, but rather from the perspective of the exceptional. This is achieved principally by attending to those perspectives that are left out of the dominant discourses, from the perspective of those at the margins. He also writes without an assumption of rational continuity, that there is a particular telos to history that would allow it to be conducive to a narrative constituted by a beginning, middle, and an end. Foucault thus attempts to relate events in their materiality, with all their contradictions, irrationality, and erroneous assertions.

Perhaps Foucault's most significant contribution to contemporary intellectual Weltanschauung has to do with his assertions regarding the relationship of knowledge and power. Anywhere one finds knowledge, one will find power. As I read Foucault, these form the conditions for the possibility of one another. Subsequently, "truth is undoubtedly the sort of error that cannot be refuted because it was hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history."\(^{382}\)

Foucault argues that knowledge is not only comprised of institutions, but also of discourses and communications that function through rules of exclusion. Those people who have been excluded, those who have been deemed "other" during and subsequent to the Enlightenment and modernity, include non-Western persons – primarily persons of

Thus, in some of his early works, e.g., *Madness and Civilization*, Foucault explores how the discourse of reason has excluded the mad. He notes that from antiquity through the medieval period, the fools, the mad, were seen as possessing important wisdom. In various instances, in various societies, they were held in high esteem as being individuals uniquely blessed by God or the gods. Yet, with a shift in the coding of reason vs. unreason in Western society, they were excluded. Moreover, this exclusion was premised on notions of being human (which also were inextricably linked with assumptions and assertions about what it meant to be human). This later point evolves into Foucault’s rejection of the term or concept of ‘human’ as the subject of humanist discourses that emerge in the human sciences in the nineteenth century. For him, it is inherently exclusionary as opposed to being inclusive.

Foucault asserts that reformers created a completely new disciplinary matrix around madness. This matrix constituted a system in which they were observed, processed, etc. The result was an expansion of the therapeutic zone, an expansion that he asserts possibly came encompass the whole of the social field. This is an example of control, associated with language and discourse.

It is in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that he continues his analysis of disciplinary matrixes, by looking at the development of the modern Western

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383 As noted by more than one scholar, this is a significant impediment to Habermasian communication theories.
penal system. He begins with his now well-known depiction of the punishment of a person where punishment was a public spectacle. In this instance, the drawing and quartering of the criminal and the pouring of burning sulfur into his body are meant to illicit a confession from the condemned while also making amends for his acts of injustice. Moreover, it is also an expression of the power of the sovereign. Indeed, one might assert that the power of the sovereign in this instance is literally inscribed on the body. In the modern context, however, punishment is replaced by the notion of comprehensive qua universal body. In what is characterized once more as a humane gesture, punishment becomes public works. Thus, prisons become more like schools, where one is reformed or renormalized, in order that they might be reintroduced into the social body, if all goes well: 

In his analysis, however, Foucault notes that such reforms do not involve the abolition of power, but rather the transmutation of power. The body does not have to be “written on” in a large or grandiose fashion, but rather through the implementation of power on the level of the microscopic, bodies are meant to become docile. The reformers have not abolished power, but instead, have facilitated a microphysics of power. Deploying the metaphor of Bentham’s panopticon, Foucault asserts that society has become a carceral body where the individual is controlled through instruments of surveillance as well as being “self-regulated” through various discourses. Such discourses associated with self-regulation Foucault will come to name “technologies of the self.”

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The key to any discussion of discipline in Foucault’s sense is that human beings become subjects (‘docile bodies’) and subsequently monitor and constrain themselves.

Other scholars have noted this phenomenon, although not necessarily framing their analysis in terms of power. Yet, the principle issue regarding the formation of subjects is present. Moreover, this is intrinsic in an analytics of the everyday. For example, I would assert that there are numerous affinities between Foucault’s thought in this area and that of the sociologist Peter Berger, who explores how society defines and organizes reality and how individuals subsequently appropriate this reality into their own subjective consciousness as “the way things are.” For Berger, religion is one of the formations in this overarching reality, which he calls the *nomos*. What Berger offers that is different from Foucault, however, is that Berger reads the construction of reality and sacredness as a harnessing activity that takes everyday experiences as the behavior that sets up the normative and institutional aspects of social life. The norms and plausibility structures are not transcendental from the perspective that they are delivered from some place beyond human experience, but the harnessing of everyday experience as reality.

In his first major work, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Peter Berger asserts that human beings confront the world without the guidance of instincts and thus need knowledge in order to survive. For Berger, individuals do not construct knowledge on their own. Knowledge is eminently social, always and at every level. This knowledge is

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387 I see the work of Berger as important for a number of reasons and call attention to it here because he has been a presence in the American academic scene for some four decades. Thus, although he does not refer to the microphysics of power, as is the case with Foucault, his analysis, nevertheless, focuses on the form of power involved in the construction of subjects.

shared in community and is transferred through various interactions. The construction, maintenance, and transmission of this knowledge are a human affair; the systems and structures constitute a culture. While knowledge can grow, develop, and deteriorate, it does so only at the level of the community.\(^{389}\)

In *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger applied his sociology of knowledge to religion specifically.\(^{390}\) Here the *nomos* is achieved through a three-fold process that involves *Externalization*,\(^{391}\) in which people project their conception of the world out into the world; *Objectivation*,\(^{392}\) in which this projected conception is given the status of objective reality; and finally *Internalization*,\(^{393}\) in which this objective reality is re-appropriated into the mind of the individual as the representation of reality.\(^{394}\) This image of reality must be maintained against any number of possible assaults, which necessitates the presence of “plausibility structures.” Such structures within a society include such things as educational systems, media, and literary canons. If plausibility structures are sufficiently strong, most people will accept the *nomos* as a given. However, plausibility structures may be weakened by the presence of competing *nomoi* or the appearance of credible contradictory evidence. Active threats to the *nomos* require the development of theodicies, or ways of accounting for counterevidence within the structure of the *nomos*. For example, death can be rationalized into the *nomos* by proper belief in an afterlife. Massive suffering can be understood as a moral punishment. If the theodicy ever failed, the result would be anomy, the collapse of the *nomos*. Most people would do anything to

\(^{389}\) As will be noted later in the section on de Certeau, within the thought of Foucault and Berger one is confronted with a loss of agency for the individual, for the “self.” We will see this in Bourdieu as well.


\(^{391}\) Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 4, 8, 81.

\(^{392}\) Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 4, 8, 83.

\(^{393}\) Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, 4, 18, 83.

\(^{394}\) This projectionist theory bears a stark resemblance to that of Feuerbach’s in *The Essence of Christianity*. 
avoid the meaninglessness and chaos that would result from this collapse. In general, individuals must be induced to accept the commonsensical nature of their society’s *nomos*. One consequence of this is a kind of alienation such that there is a denial of ownership between persons and the worldview they created. In extreme cases of near-total socialization, human beings exhibit “bad faith,” meaning that they are so invested in the *nomos* that they simply cannot act against it.

One other important theorist who provides insight into the perspective of power as it relates to practice is Pierre Bourdieu. Of special note and relevance to microscopic expression of power are his works *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 395 *Distinction*, 396 and the *Logic of Practice* 397. It is in these volumes where he introduces many of his key concepts (habitus, doxa, and cultural capital) that have come to a significantly influence on the humanities and social sciences.

In the foreword to *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu is noted to have stated that his work is a “reflection on scientific practice which will disconcert both those who reflect on the social sciences without practicing them and those who practice them without reflecting on them.” 398 For Bourdieu, practice; i.e., those things that people do as opposed to what they say, figures significantly in how he explains the processes by which social patterns of behavior reproduce social structures; namely, how do people contribute to the perpetuation/reproduction of social strictures and what is and is not possible to do in a particular cultural context? Bourdieu argues that the language of rules, codes, and

models are inadequate to the task of explaining social life, that they "cease to convince as soon as one considers the practical mastery of the symbolism of social interaction … presupposed by the most everyday games of sociability and accompanied by the application of a spontaneous semiology." In Chapter 1, Bourdieu refers to the concept of honor among Kabylian men. He notes that dignity is accorded to the man deemed capable of "playing the game of honour, and playing it well." The game involves a challenge and riposte. While one may attempt to transcribe and identify a logic of the practice predicated on various corollaries or propositions, Bourdieu asserts that the scenario or events originate in a disposition, namely, the sense of honor.

The cultivated disposition, inscribed in the body schema and in the schemes of thought, which enables each agent to engender all the practices consistent with the logic of challenge and riposte, and only such practices, by means of countless inventions, which the stereotyped unfolding of a ritual would in no way demand.

Moreover, while a logic or theory may retrospectively account for choices associated the game, this does not imply that such practice[s] [are] perfectly predictable, like the acts inserted in the rigorously stereotyped sequences of a rite; and this is true not only for the observer but also for the agents, who find in the relative predictability and unpredictability of the possible ripostes the opportunity to put their strategies to work… even the most strictly ritualized exchanges, in which all the moments of action, and their unfolding, … have room for strategies.

Subsequently, one comes to understand that customs are also the product of schemes. As a consequence, laws and precepts are not the product of some "transcendent juridical code," but are deposited and thus reside in every member of the

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403 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 16.
group and are otherwise known as the dispositions of the *habitus*.\footnote{Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 17.} A *habitus* is a set of dispositions that generate and structure human actions and behaviors. It shapes all practice, and yet it is not experienced as repressive or enforcing. Its effects on the individual typically go unnoticed. Another way of talking about the habitus is as a set of unconscious assumptions regarding the world.\footnote{"Durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules" (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72).}

Dispositions can be said to come into focus when social and cultural markers such as occupation, income, education, religion, and taste preferences (food, clothing, music, art) are juxtaposed against one another. It is once more important to emphasize that a *habitus* is not deterministic. In the words of Bourdieu, the habitus is “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations.”\footnote{Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78.} As such, an agent is able to respond accordingly to various demands placed on him/her in particular situations. It would be a mistake, however to assume that said agent is autonomous, independent, acting as if free from constraints. Rather, in practice it is *habitus*, acquired through practice, that forms and informs practice. The *habitus* is “history turned into nature,” i.e. “second nature,”\footnote{Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78-79.} functioning on the level of the unconscious. Indeed, one comes to inhabit a *habitus* through one’s lived experience, in one’s body; e.g., how it is adorned, how one moves and gestures, what one eats. Again, Bourdieu notes that a significant portion of what governs one’s behavior does not adhere to formal logic, but rather the fuzzy logic of practices.\footnote{Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 116.}
It is important to note, however, that Bourdieu is not only concerned with the process of socialization or enculturation into a set of practices, into a *habitus*, but he is also concerned with the power relations that exist between social classes, i.e., with how social inequality is perpetuated and maintained in this seemingly benign way of appropriating *habitus*. *Habitus* might then be seen as everyday practice or being-in-the-world, if one returns to what I earlier implied to as a possible Heideggerian way of understanding everyday life. *Habitus* functions to distinguish one social class from another. Bourdieu goes on to assert that the dominance of one class over another occurs covertly, symbolic power is experienced, and the arbitrariness of the “social order” is manifest as natural. In those contexts where the ‘objective order’ and the ‘subjective principles of organization’ cohere, the natural and the social world are taken for granted, unquestioned, and unexamined. 409 This state is what Bourdieu calls *doxa*, “so as to distinguish it from an orthodox or heterodox belief implying awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic belief.”\(^\text{410}\)

Further, in addition to the economic exchange system, which has been extensively studied, Bourdieu alludes to the use of the symbolic exchange system. This exchange system is controlled by the dominant class. Bourdieu talks not only about economic capital, but also cultural capital. This involves aspects like education, linguistic competence, etc. Cultural capital is used to maintain class distinction. In his subsequent work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, taste is the category Bourdieu uses to describe how distinctions arise and are justified between high and low culture. It is here that he talks about French society and its various aesthetic and taste

\(^{409}\) Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 164.
\(^{410}\) Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 164. In my estimation, *doxa* is not dissimilar to Berger’s *nomos*. 
preferences. Taste is related to cultural capital. “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.”

With respect to the application of Bourdieu’s thought to the study of religion, the notion of *habitus* points to the manner in which religion might function to shape social behavior and power relations. Thus *habitus* may be useful for studying particular traditions, the dynamics between various religious groups, and how such groups are situated and function within a larger cultural context where everyday life is a construction of social reality as I have interpreted from the insight of Berger.

Bourdieu is also useful for his functionalism. Namely, as noted in the first chapter on religious experience, it is clearly the case that an analysis of religion informed by Bourdieu’s analytics would hold that it is not simply, or primarily, about those beliefs and practices that are explicit and conscious within a religious tradition or community. Just as important – if not more so – are the hidden invisible dimensions of *habitus*, *doxa*, tastes, and forms of cultural capital that operate to create cohesion and identity. Moreover, I would assert that a Bourdieuan approach to religion would be integrative with respect to the larger social structures and hierarchies of culture in which it is situated. Yet, as I also implied in Chapter 1, I believe that an interdisciplinary approach incorporating both functionalist and substantive perspectives provides a more comprehensive and compelling explanation of religious phenomenon and religious experience. As I will also note again later (informed by the scholarship of de Certeau), though Bourdieu theory of practice restores a theoretical basis for agency that is expunged in the early scholarship of Foucault, his schematization of practice and his strict functionalism are still problematic because he seems to develop a theory of practice that remains highly structured, and an

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explanation of social life in which agency remains highly circumscribed. However, one could bring a particularly deconstructive reading to Bourdieu's notion of practice that suggests an experience of the everyday that is more implicit (not to mention more complex) than it is explicit.

The Resuscitation of Agency

In opposition to such reproduction theorists, Michel de Certeau considers social space more porous and open to repurposing by the individual through his or her daily decisions and practices. De Certeau's 'ways of operating' "constitute the innumerable practices by means of which users reappropriate the space organized by techniques of sociocultural production." Indeed, de Certeau goes on to state that the ways of operating pose questions at once analogous and contrary to those addressed by Foucault in Discipline and Punish:

analogous, in that the goal is to perceive and analyze the microbe-like operations proliferating within technocratic structures and deflecting their functioning by means of a multitude of "tactics" articulated in the details of everyday life; contrary, in that the goal is not to make clearer how the violence of order is transmuted into a disciplinary technology, but rather, to bring to light the clandestine forms taken by the dispersed, tactical, and makeshift creativity of groups or individuals already caught in the nets of "discipline."

In other words, de Certeau's central critique is that disciplinary control is overstated by Foucault. At the same time, however, de Certeau also warns against a false consciousness of "freedom" or autonomy.

In later work, Foucault acknowledges his overstatement of disciplinary control. For example, in the essay "The Subject and Power" he talks about the construction of
oneself in a position of marginality.\textsuperscript{414} Indeed, it would be remiss to not acknowledge Foucault’s development from his early “carceralism” to his work on governmentality as the management of conduct manifest in the modern liberal state, which Foucault summarized as “the art of government.”\textsuperscript{415} Governmentality, as conducting conduct, included the “art” of encouraging people to manage their own conduct, in the absence of coercion or intervention by the state or its operatives. Subsequent to his exploration of governmentality, Foucault goes on to coin the term \textit{biopower}, to describe a political technology of power that enables the control of populations by exercising power over other bodies. This power is described by Foucault as “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations.”\textsuperscript{416} It is in this last move, as an intersection of his concerns about power, ethics, and subjectivity, that he deploys the concept of “technologies of the self” (also referred to as care of the self and practices of the self). According to Foucault, technologies of the self are the forms of knowledge and strategies that “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 way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”\textsuperscript{417}

\textsuperscript{414} Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power." Afterword in Michel Foucault: \textit{Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics}, by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982) and \textit{The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self}.

\textsuperscript{415} "The art of government, instead of seeking to found itself in transcendental rules, a cosmological model, or a philosophico-moral ideal, must find the principles of its rationality in that which constitutes the specific reality of the state" (Michel Foucault, “Governmentality” in \textit{Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984}, volume 3 (London: Penguin Books, 2002). 213).

\textsuperscript{416} Michel Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality}, 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 140.

\textsuperscript{417} Michel Foucault et al., \textit{Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault} (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 18
While the later Foucault certainly appears more open to the transformative potential of practice, there is still a question in my mind regarding the relationship of such acts or practices that might be deemed transgressive, oppositional, or resistant to dominant relations of power. On this point, I see de Certeau as a useful via media or tertium quid with respect to an understanding of power in African American religious thought, an understanding that tempers the grandiosity and mendacity associated with the dominant paradigm of liberation while preempting despair and the nihilistic threat. With respect to Foucault’s later work, Slavoj Zizek notes that such a move in Foucault is a move in the direction of humanism:

With Foucault, we have a turn against that universalist ethics which results in a kind of aestheticization of ethics: each subject must, without any support from universal rules, build his own mode of self-mastery; he must harmonize the antagonism of the powers within himself—-invent himself, so to speak, produce himself as subject, find his own particular art of living.418

Conclusion

It is important to note that the analytics of power on the level of microphysics has not been completely overlooked by African American scholars of religion. For example, Charles H. Long refers to Foucault in *Significations*, calling upon how the mad/insane become the “other” through the acts of discourse and signification.419 He notes that there are similarities with respect to how such discourses affect these indigenous ‘others,’ e.g., women, peasants, criminals, or the mentally ill, and what eventually happens to enslaved Africans.420 Foucault has also been helpful for a scholar such as Kelly Brown Douglas to

question White patriarchal hegemony with respect to its effect and impact on issues of African Americans' experience of sexuality and the body. In addition, Anthony B. Pinn, in works such as *Loving the Body* and *Terror and Triumph* utilizes Foucault's thought with respect to the body as a social construction, particularly with respect to how discursive expressions of power constitute or construct docile bodies.

Nonetheless, among more than a few notable African American scholars of religion, an emphasis on a microscopic analytics or the microphysics of power is viewed with wariness. For example, Dwight Hopkins maintains that a microscopic analytics of power, particularly as it has been deployed in the deconstruction of the Enlightenment notion of the subject (specifically European subjects), has little to do with the substantive, palpable oppression of black folk. For Hopkins, such analysis may be useful to African American theologians to the extent that it calls them to examine their particular discursive practices, such as their "God talk," but little more.

Similar convictions are also expressed by Cornel West. In *The American Evasion of Philosophy,* West finds fault with theories that are preoccupied with the analytics of power associated with particular kinds of operation, specifically those by which human

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424 Pinn, *Terror and Triumph.* See in *Terror and Triumph* Pinn's discourse regarding rituals of reference; e.g., p. 49.
beings are constructed into subjects. West goes on to say that one must be concerned about operations of power beyond those associated with conditions for the possibility of the construction of the subject. Such questions, West maintains, are “inextricably tied to a conception of validity that stands above and outside the social practices of human beings.”

West is also concerned with the tendency of such theories and methodologies associated with the microanalytics of power and what he maintains is their devaluation of moral discourse. Conversely, for prophetic Christianity and prophetic pragmatism, projects West has championed over the course of his scholarly career, moral discourse is essential. Moreover, West maintains that one engaged in social, cultural, and political criticism as it relates to creating a just society must address macroscopic operations of power such as economic modes of production and nation-states. Moreover, the prophetic pragmatist and revolutionary Christians must dare to embrace a strong sense of human agency.

Therefore, it is not surprising that when looking to various intellectual traditions within the contemporary academy in “The Dilemma of the Black Intellectual,” West expresses concern about those who would follow certain forms of postmodern skepticism. For West, such a position is a bourgeois indulgence and an evasion of the suffering of the oppressed and disinherited. “It provides a sophisticated excuse for

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ideological and social distance" and it leads to “the fetishizing of critical consciousness” which does not promote organic human relationships. 432

I contend, however, that a microscopic analytics of power has much to offer in the investigation of African American religious experience. Critiques of foundationalism, essentialism, and emphasis on difference are certainly needed with respect to the study of African American religious experience, particularly as it relates to such experiences in terms of the everyday. 433 To minimize microscopic forms and manifestation of power as advocated by many “liberationists” is to choose not to confront potentially insidious or invidious forces. Further, I contend that the incorporation of microanalytics of power, in its various articulations, might reveal elements of African American religion and religious experience that have been ignored or deemed insignificant. What might one learn about what it means to be religious? I assert that it is in the unpacking of power, and the assertion of a microphysics of power that microscopic analysis becomes important. Moreover, such a move is also consistent with the concentration on the everyday lives of African American men and women as well as members of other oppressed communities, the principle referent of African American religious scholars who emphasize liberation. As asserted in the examination of the various theorists of the everyday, an attunement to the microscopic, precisely on the level of the microscopic, on the level that power associated with the construction of subjects and selves resides. Again, it is my contention that such an unpacking is necessary because it calls one to an engagement with lived experience ignored by theories and methodologies that emphasize macroscopic social

432 West, Keeping the Faith, 81.
433 I would argue that it is important as we explore what we mean by African American or Black. Indeed, scholars such as Bell Hooks, Cornel West, Paul Gilroy, Michael Eric Dyson, and Victor Anderson have all undertaken the issue of essentialism as it relates to identity in African American experience.
structures, forces, and institutions. While such analysis possesses merit, what is lost in such analyses are the little, seemingly unimportant aspects of daily life that could be harnessed and contribute to the "liberative" discourse. The institutionalization, systemization, totalization of religious discourse has obscured the power of the day-to-day lived experience of many people.

Granted, questioning one's fundamental assumptions about the nature and function of religion and religious experience as they relate to individual and corporate transformation is a process not without risk. It involves what I call a willingness to embrace the critic's paradox, which I understand as follows: it is often the case that the more powerful, nuanced, or complex an account of the world, the more hopeless people feel that they can do anything about their circumstances. Conversely, however, in the absence of such an accounting, people will underestimate or mischaracterize what they are confronting.

Further, with respect to the criticism that the theorists whose work I have invoked have focused primarily on European subjects, it does not follow that because the object of investigation has not been people of color that the tools may not be of some benefit. Moreover, the line of argumentation I am pursuing in this thesis is, in no way, the uncritical appropriation of the thought of any of the individuals referenced. Rather, it is my objective to provide a compelling case for a cognitive repositioning. It is also an appeal for African American scholars of religion to expand their descriptive,

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434 There has been significant application of Foucault's theories and methodologies to other peoples, as it has been appropriated and used extensively in anthropology. The same can be said of the work of Bourdieu and even de Certeau. This is less the case for some of the other theorists that I have referred to in this chapter,
interpretative, and explanatory resources as well as to engage and to embrace theoretical and methodological innovation.

Finally, as one initially trained as a physicist, there is a particularly helpful analogy to the type of posture that I am suggesting, which natural scientists hold between classical and modern physics. This analogy is called the correspondence principle. In its simplest articulation, the correspondence principle deals with the relationship between Newton or classical physics (mechanics and dynamics) and modern physics (specifically quantum mechanics and special relativity). While rooted in markedly different construals of the physical universe, one finds that in dealing with macroscopic objects the quantum equations collapse in such a way as to cohere with the classical equations. Likewise, at speeds that are substantially less than those of light, the equations associated with special relativity collapse and cohere to classical dynamic equations, hence the nomenclature of correspondence. The quantum or microscopic level, however, is an interstitial region. It is the realm of probabilities and potentialities, a place of indeterminacy. Once more, it is not my intention to promote only one perspective, but rather to promote an orientation, a way of looking at the world, that attends to the heterological, the ambiguous, and the oblique.\(^{435}\)

\(^{435}\) Such is also indicative of the everyday. Indeed, as I note in the genealogy of the everyday, theorist such as Blanchot and Lefebvre find in the "obliquity" of the everyday, germs of resistance to law, surveillance, and control, which might serve as resources for "radical transformation" of the quotidian, producing the everyday as "a category, a utopia, and an Idea" rather than as "average existence." (Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, 238.)
Chapter 5 – Rethinking African American Religious Experience

Introduction

In Chapter 5, I will demonstrate the advantage of an analysis of African American religious experience in terms of “everydayness” as opposed to the macroscopic liberative hermeneutical norm that is common. The data I will use in this analysis will consist of the three extensive phenomenological descriptions in chapter 2.

Hermeneutic of Liberation vs. Explanations of Everyday Life

As asserted in the introduction of this dissertation, it is my contention that the dominant theoretical and methodological approach to the study of African American religious experience is markedly lacking and inadequate with respect to its descriptive (phenomenological) and explanative depth. This paradigm, with its emphasis on a macroscopic understanding of power as well as its frequent articulation in an exceptionalist and exclusivist Christian guise, often does violence to African American religion and religious experience, broadly construed. In order to make this most evident, I bring together the philosophies and concepts of everyday life in dialogue with the dominant paradigm as conveyed by perhaps its most noted proponent, James Hal Cone.

In chapter 3, I attempted to present Cone’s understanding of African American religious experience. There I noted that for Cone, Christ – as God incarnate – evinces a deity who is committed to the well-being of the weak and helpless in human society. Thus, God is active in the struggle to bring about an end to oppression for the African
American community. For Cone, it is this notion of God as present in the African American condition that empowers the African American community to fight against a society that denies them their humanity.

According to Cone, African Americans speak of God in light of the African American experience. Unfortunately, one is left to assume that under the rubric of black or African American experience is included African American religious experience, yet this is something that Cone does not make explicit. Moreover, it is not clear if it does include African American religious experiences, that it does so in a truly broad sense. Indeed, as read through the lens of Black theology, not all African American Christian experiences would seem to be valid, because a religious or Christian experience (if it is truly an experience of the God who is on the side of the poor and oppressed) must instill within them a desire to engage in the "liberation struggle."

Given that the discipline of Black theology (as well as a majority of womanist theoethical discourse) retains such a strong apologetic and normative component – some might say prophetic component – ostensibly grounded in Christian exclusivist and exceptionalist claims, a truly broad and dispassionate analysis of African American religion in its heterological and variegated givenness is rendered impracticable. For example, when Cone talks about African Americans embracing and accepting the Christ

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438 According to Cone, African Americans embrace and accept the centrality of the Christ event, yet this is emphatically in the context of what “Jesus Christ means when they are confronted with the brutality of white racism.” (Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 23).
event in the context of what Jesus Christ means when they are confronted with white racism\(^439\); it appears he is making a claim as to intentionality. However, do such claims hold with respect to African American religious experience broadly understood? Even if one assumes the claim is meant to pertain only to African American Christians, is this indeed the intentionality evinced in the three case studies presented? If Cone is referring to the effects on Africana persons in a racialized society with respect to the constitution of viable selves, as was the case for Du Bois, Fanon, and Gordon, I believe the claim to have merit. Yet, elsewhere, Cone asserts that African American religious experience cannot be equated with notions of inwardness or feelings of absolute dependence – that such perspectives are indulgences that African Americans are not afforded.\(^440\) Yet, what if it is consistent with some African Americans’ religious experience? Again, there is the troubling insistence on conformity and homogeneity of experience that is synonymous with Foucault’s violently imposed truths.

The ambiguity and imprecision of Cone’s analysis of African American religious experience unfortunately persists throughout his oeuvre. In *God of the Oppressed*, perhaps the most systematic of Cone’s texts, the work begins with a short spiritual autobiography of the author. In the first chapter, Cone writes richly about his early church experience that awakened his sense of vocation. According to Cone, at Macedonia African Methodist Episcopal Church

I encountered the presence of the divine Spirit, and my soul was moved and filled with an aspiration for freedom. Through prayer, song, and sermon, God made frequent visits to the black community in Bearden and reassured the people of his concern for their well-being and his will to bring them safely home... Every Sunday the black brothers and sisters of Macedonia experienced a foretaste of


their “home in glory” when God’s Spirit visited their worship, and they responded with thankfulness and humility, singing joyfully:

I responded to the black Church experience by offering myself for membership at Macedonia when I was only ten and by entering the ministry at the early age of sixteen.441

In another moment of reflection, Cone asserts that his theological orientation cannot be the same as that of his white colleagues at Union Seminary, again presumably because of racialization.

They were not born in Bearden. They did not know about Macedonia A.M.E. Church, and how the Black Spirit of God descended upon that community when folks gathered for worship and praise to him who had brought them a “mighty long way.” They could not know the significance of black prayer, because they had not heard nor felt the invested meaning of those familiar words as Brother Elbert Thrower invited the congregation to pray with him a little while.442

Similar observations arise in later works of Cone such as in My Soul Looks Back.

Cone says:

As a source of identity and survival, the faith of the church was that factor which sustained the people when everything else failed. God was that reality to which the people turned for identity and worth because the existing social, political, and economic structures said that they are nobody.443

Further,

After being treated as things for six days of the week, black folk went to church on Sunday in order to affirm and experience another definition of their humanity. In the eyes of the Almighty, they were children of God whose future was not defined by the white structures that humiliated them.

When the people of Macedonia had their backs up against the wall and all human resources appeared exhausted, they did not hesitate to turn to the Lord in prayer.444

442 Cone, God of the Oppressed, 4.
444 Cone, My Soul Looks Back, 23.
Moreover, Cone is critical of those who would deem such religious experiences as pathological.

For some Marxists and other leftists who do not know existentially the black religious experience, the survival and identity emphasis of black religion will surely validate their claim that it is an opiate. There are of course many black churches that are vulnerable to the Marxist critique. But I would claim that to apply the label of opiate to black religion in Bearden during my early years is to be doctrinaire and superficial, neglecting to probe the depths of the black experience that gave birth to the church.

Furthermore, labeling religion a mere painkiller ignores the black church as the source, not only of identity and survival, but of the sociopolitical struggle of liberation.445

In examining these personal accounts of religious experience, it is interesting to note in Cone the absence of liberation discourse in terms of macroscopic, systemic, and structural transformation. Instead, he refers to the communication of personal value and worth before God in the context of community. He refers to identity and survival through a faith that sustained a person when everything else failed. In my estimation, such descriptions are more consistent with those noted in theories of the everyday, with oppositional tactics, practices, rituals, and technologies associated with the maintenance and creation of viable selves. It is also consistent with a characterization of religion as a quest for wholeness that I have previously presented. Moreover, it is a process that is episodic and transient. As Cone says, “After being treated as things for six days of the week,” i.e. as other, as objects and not subjects, “black folk went to church on Sunday in order to affirm and experience another definition of their humanity,” i.e. as selves, as subjects, as a people. As will become evident, such is consistent with what transpired in the experiences of Thurman, Crane, and Valeria.

445 Cone, My Soul Looks Back, 24.
Returning to *For My People*, Cone writes that the task of black theology is not to tell others what the gospel is, but rather to take as the content for black theology the "*prereflective understanding of the gospel had by black Christians, in order to make their voices heard throughout the churches and society.*" In order to ascertain this understanding, Cone exhorts his peers to turn to the sermons, songs, and prayers of our grandparents, as well as other material that is embedded in the history of the black church. According to Cone, this material is waiting to be put into a theological language that can serve as a guide for contemporary effort to be faithful. Put slightly differently, he seems to be saying that the religious experience of our African American forebears should be the source material for contemporary constructive work that is black theology. However, this continues to beg the question as to how one assesses the religious experiences themselves. How does one evaluate, interpret, or explain the sermons, songs, and prayers? Indeed, there appears to be a disposition among many African American religionists that they are in possession of a special gnosis, that their engagement with subjects, artifacts, and data a certain need be predicated on no more than some intimacy and or urgency in their quest to valorize the experiences of the marginalized and the dispossessed.

In many respects, the African American posture may also stem from a mistrust of the intellectual tradition associated with the field of religious studies. As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, this is associated with failings of the tradition,

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446 Cone, *For My People*, 117.
447 For Cone, black theology is not academic theology; it is not a theology of the dominant classes and racial majorities. It is a theology of the black poor, reconstructing their hopes and dreams of God's coming and liberated world. The sources for this theology are not found in Barth, Tillich, and Pannenberg. They are found in the spirituals, blues, and sayings of the black people. One must go back to black churches so as to authenticate the vocation of by helping the people to move closer to their calling to be God's instrument of liberation in the world.
particularly with respect to various discourses that have perpetuated and instantiated the oppression of various peoples, most notably those who are non-European and non-Western. Thus, many African American scholars, academics, and intellectuals, among them scholars of religion, have come to view theory with suspicion. Making a similar observation, Paget Henry asserts “the eclipsing of the rationality” of non-Western peoples – particularly people of African descent – by the Western intellectual tradition have made problematic the status of theory for those engaged in Africana and African American studies.\footnote{Paget Henry, “Africana Phenomenology: Its Philosophical Implications,” in \textit{Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise} (Fall 2006), 1.} Henry goes on to assert that this has led to the approach among many Africana scholars to engage in the amassing of “case studies” to be used as a rebuttal to the dominant theories, methods, and discourses viewed as authoritative by the West. Finally, he shares his experience with Africana scholars who associate theory and rational thought with Anglo-American/European (white) patriarchy.\footnote{Henry, \textit{Africana Phenomenology}, 1.}

One should recall that I presented various components of this “eclipsing of African and Africana people” within the Western intellectual tradition in Chapter 2. Similar critiques have been proffered by Cornel West in works such as \textit{Prophesy Deliverance} (in the chapter “Genealogy of Racism”) and by Paul Gilroy in \textit{The Black Atlantic} (in the chapter “Masters, Mistresses, Slaves, and the Antinomies of Modernity”). I would also suggest that a consequence of this othering and its relationship to oppression has resulted in an emphasis among African American religionists on the ethical over against the often speculative and abstract disposition theorists. Indeed, the ethical or practical impulse in the American context is all the more probable due to the autochthonous philosophical movement of pragmatism.
It is my contention, however, that in so doing, there has been a lack of attention with respect to the strengths and weaknesses associated with the various disciplinary methodologies these scholars deploy, as well as a failure to interrogate their own assumptions.\footnote{In the Cartesian tradition, I affirm a necessity of radical doubt. Consistent with a philosophical lineage that extends from the pre-Socratic Gorgias to the postmodern Derrida, I affirm the role of deconstruction/destruction.}

In this respect, the conceptual framework that I espouse – theories of everyday life – is superior to that of the dominant paradigm because of its microscopic focus and ability to bracket systemization and intentionality of non-imposition of schematizations upon phenomenon. Again, this is in keeping with handling phenomena in their givenness, particularity, and distinctiveness. Likewise, in the context of the dominant paradigm, there is a tendency to equate African American experience with oppression, with an assault on black people, which is overcome through an act or acts of liberation, understood as historical, material, equality on a macroscopic scale. Again, Cone equates the African American experience with “a life of humiliation and suffering.”\footnote{Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 23.} Later he states “the true black experience in most cases is very concrete... sleeping in subways, being bitten by rats, six people living in a kitchenette.”\footnote{Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 24.} Yet surely, such a characterization is not synonymous with African American experience, let alone African American religious experience. This point was made by the African American ethicist Preston N. Washington, some forty years ago, in an article entitled “The Black Experience and Black Religion.”\footnote{Preston N. Williams, “Black Experience and Black Religion,” \textit{Theology Today} 26, no. 3 (1969).} Indeed, Williams offers “three typologies for grasping and explaining the black man’s experience” and then illustrates them in terms of...
“black religion.” Of the three – victimization, assimilation-integration, and black awareness or black consciousness – the first, he asserts, has touched the life of every African American, though naturally not all African Americans suffer in the same way or to the same degree. In many respects, the concept of victimization that William notes that he borrows from the eminent sociologist St. Clair Drake resonates with the phenomenological category I call racialization in Chapter 2.

It is my contention that inquiry into a phenomenon must begin with a thorough description of the phenomenon. Such is the raw data necessary for any process of reflection, whether it be functional or interpretive. It is from the description that one begins to perceive that the telos of African American religious experience has to do with a pursuit of wholeness, where one strives toward being an “I.” Yet, as mentioned in Chapter 2 in laying out the phenomenology, the “I” or the “self” is not a thing. To use the language of Sartre, it is “nothing.” As Lewis Gordon notes in Bad Faith and Anti-Black Racism, the I is empty and unreflective; it is being without content – without qualities, states, attitudes, and any of the array of intentions associated with, say, a Cartesian conception of the I or the self. It eludes one’s attempts to grasp it, to hold on to it. The same is subsequently characteristic of wholeness – that is it not a thing to be grasped, it is ephemeral; it is elusive, fleeting, and transitory. It is not a permanent state, albeit, there is often a longing to establish it as such. Yet, in the words of Sartre, human beings are haunted by visions of completeness, of being beings-in-itself or ens causa sui, rather than beings-for-itself.

454 Williams, "Black Experience and Black Religion," 247. Also see ———, "James Cone and the Problem of a Black Ethic," Harvard Theological Review 65, no. 4 (1972), for his critique of Cone’s theology in terms of its ethical argumentation.
455 Sartre, Being and Nothingness.
In a return to the phenomenon, it is evident that there are numerous instances where African American religious experiences do not seem to necessitate and certainly are not constituted by a longing for macroscopic liberation. Further, there is also not a necessary commitment to a particular metanarrative – namely the Christian narrative. Albeit from an historical context, the religious experience of African Americans is most consistently thematized through the Christian tradition.

There is that aspect of the relationship between egogenesis and sociogenesis, of the self as immanently social, but this is not the same as the macroscopic in terms of power. As noted in chapter 4, this is power on the level of the *habitus*, associated with *doxa* and *nomos* as given in the analysis of Bourdieu, Foucault, and Berger. It is by no mean surprising that Durkheim would state that religion is an immanently social fact, as the self is again immanently social. Phenomenological analysis describes how the social/community aspect of a self can function as a source of alternative or oppositional discourses that facilitates the construction of identities that resist the fracturing and fragmentation to which one is subjected in one’s everyday life. This fracturing and

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This is central to Sartre’s argument in *Being and Nothingness*. The only being that is *ens causa sui* [the being that is the cause of itself] is God. Sartre is basically arguing that human beings are ventures, endeavors, moments, of trying to be God. We pursue the impossible ideal of being-for-and-in-itself. Sartre says

*Ontology furnishes us two pieces of information which serve as the basis for metaphysics: first, that every process of a foundation of the self is a rupture in the identity-of-being of the in-itself, a withdrawal by being in relation to itself and the appearance of presence to self or consciousness. It is only by making itself for-itself that being can aspire to be the cause of itself. Consciousness as the nihilation of being appears therefore as one stage in a progression toward the immanence of causality-i.e., toward being a self-cause. The progression, however, stops there as the result of the insufficiency of being in the for-itself. The temporalization of consciousness is not an ascending progress toward the dignity of the causa *sui*; it is a surface run-off whose origin is, on the contrary, the impossibility of being a self-cause. Also the ens causa *sui* remains as the lacked, the indication of an impossible *vertical* surpassing which by its very nonexistence conditions the flat movement of consciousness... And if we can raise the question of the being of the for-itself articulated in the in-itself, it is because we define ourselves a priori by means of a pre-ontological comprehension of the *ens causa sui*. Of course this *ens causa sui* is impossible, and the concept of it, as we have seen, includes a contradiction.*
fragmentation exists for all persons. However, in the context of African American persons, the fracturing and fragmentation involves the experience of racialization that affects one on the level of the existential and ontological. It is the encounter with racialization that distinguishes African American experience, and racialization that disrupts the ordinary way of being in the world as a unitary experience, to borrow from Heidegger. Thus, the first and most significant problem with respect to the dominant paradigm is a fundamental misreading of the phenomenon. To take the phenomenon of African American religious experience seriously is not to construe it solely in terms of macroscopic liberation. The desire to organically link African American Christianity with the revolutionary impulse of the Civil Rights/Black Power movements is understandable given the period in which Cone developed Black theology, namely in the late 60s and early 70s. With respect to articulating, explaining, and understanding African American religion and religious experience, the social crisis as a lens is not a guarantor of distortion – free perception.

Cone et al, may be commended for their efforts to construct a prophetic and transformative reading of African American religion for the black community. In so doing, they also called attention to the failings of the Western intellectual and spiritual traditions as well as the communities and institutions that perpetuated them. The raison d'etre of the liberation paradigm in this sense is explicable. Further, one could also

456 In the case of Cone, it is interesting that he does allude to the pre-reflective and the ontological that would suggest a phenomenological acuity, but the absence of such analysis. Instead, there is an interpretation of phenomenon and events that appear to be predicated on some unspecified inexplicit methodology, i.e., perhaps a special gnosis.

457 It is interesting to note that both Thurman and Cone mention that due to white church people seeming oblivious to the suffering of African Americans, many African American Christians thought that whites were also ignorant regarding spiritual and biblical matters. Further, both Thurman and Cone would likely affirm that in the African American tradition, knowledge of right and wrong was derived from one's encounter with the Divine and conversion by the Holy Spirit. Since whites persisted in their wrongdoings
make an argument for certain language as a call for African Americans to consider the nature of their faith and what they might be called to do as a consequence. However, this is very different than interpreting, analyzing, or explaining African American religious experience in its givenness, as everyday practices in the lives of black folk. There is a danger in negating or dismissing those experiences that do not conform to one’s particular norm.

Perhaps to dissuade the voice of detractors of religion as intrinsically ruinous and harmful, Cone and others tread on such precarious ground in the characterization of certain expressions of African American religion as quietism or escapism. However, even more problematic, lying within certain proponents of the hermeneutic of liberation paradigm, is the assertion that authentic religious experience requires one to join God in the concrete struggle for liberation that is played out in history.458

regarding racism, despite their university training or formal church affiliation, many African American Christians assumed that they had not been converted. In My Soul Looks Back, pp. 26 and 27, Cone says the following:

How could anyone claim an identity with Jesus and be for injustice? Because the behavior of whites blatantly contradicted the gospel, and because I thought that whites did such cruel things out of ignorance, I decided that I would inform them when the next appropriate occasion occurred...

How could both black and white churches be Christian if they took opposite stands and both claimed Christ and the Bible as the basis of their views?

458 Though theologically creative and courageous, with respect to his understanding of religious experience, on this point Cone’s theology is critically flawed. Not only does it overlook or dismiss the experience of many black people, it also makes him susceptible to the well-known critique of William R. Jones. In Is God a White Racist?, Jones chastens Cone for asserting that God is on the side of the poor and oppressed without substantiating his claim. According to Jones, Cone’s attempts to embrace the Exodus or the Christ event as definitively exaltative and liberative for black people fails to overcome the challenges of maldistribution of suffering of black people and the multievidentiality of historical events. What is lacking for Cone, as it is for other black theologians, is such an exaltative-liberative event on behalf of black people in history that reveals that God is “black.” (See Jones pp. 20 and 22 for his commentary on exaltation-liberation event in general. With respect to his assessment of Cone, see pp. 100 and 113.)

Cone’s response to Jones’s assessment, in the form of an extended footnote in God of the Oppressed (p. 267-68) is very telling. Cone begins by asserting that while Jones attempts to offer an internal critique of black theology, he is not part of the inner conversation with respect to black religion. According to Cone, Jones in fact engages in a dialogue as an outsider, primarily due to his disavowal of
Such activities—indeed, such hopes, longings, and aspirations—must not be confused as synonymous with the religious experience of African Americans. To do so is to engage in the imposition of truth. Unfortunately, such truths—to paraphrase Foucault once more—are the sort of errors that are nearly impossible to refute because they have been hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history.459

As I stated earlier, I believe that the dominant liberation paradigm, as a conceptual framework for grasping the meaning and nature of African American religious experience, fails for want of a more robust understanding of religion and religious experience. In chapter 2, I alluded to similar designations, such as Paget Henry’s use of the term Africana or Paul Gilroy’s heuristic of the Black Atlantic. In the context of this work, however, I am using the term African American in association with people of known and unknown African ancestry that are the direct descendants of captive West Africans who survived slavery within the boundaries of the present United States.

With respect to their ancestry and culture, they reflect phenomena of hybridity and black Christians’ experience of Jesus Christ as Liberator and Black Messiah. Yet, this in itself is troubling, because it assumes a normative religious experience among even African American Christians.

Cone’s response has been taken as an affront to some, yet I believe that it is not without merit—particularly the issues Cone raises regarding the difference between an internal critique and an external one. While there are many possible ways to read what Cone says, I would suggest that one possibility is that for a truly internal critique, one must be able to point to a logical inconsistency within Cone’s theology. If this is indeed what he is saying, it is a reasonable proposal. The problem, however, is that I am of the opinion that such an internal contradiction is present in Cone, and it is precisely and inextricably related to his inadequate understanding of religious experience in general, including African American religious experience.

It is also my contention that Cone’s mistake stems from his commitment to the significance of the Christ event as the decisive historical event for African Americans as opposed to the decisive religious event, at least for African American Christians. This is not to say, however, that a religious event does not have historical manifestations. In the case of black religious experience, I believe that institutions such as the black church; cultural artifacts such as sermons, hymns, and slave narratives; and social movements such as the Civil Rights struggle, witness to the power of black religious experience. It is my contention, however, that Cone tragically conflates the historical and the religious. Cone interprets what I see as quintessentially religious; i.e., Black people’s experience and identification with Jesus’s life, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection, as a definitive-liberative historical event. This move allows scholars such as Jones or Pinn to offer critiques that are distressing to expressions of African American religious scholarship committed to the dominant paradigm’s construal of the Divine.

459 Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” p. 144.
creolization. It is a mistake, however, to assume homogeneity with respect to African American identity, as identity is not a fixed essence. At the same time, it is not some "vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists, and language gamers."\textsuperscript{460} In the passage immediately following the above citation, Gilroy goes on to say:

Black identity is not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned according to the extent to which the rhetoric that supports and legitimizes it is persuasive or institutionally powerful... it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires.\textsuperscript{461}

I assert that Gilroy is referring to the attribute of metastability with respect to the Africana, Black Atlantic, or African American self. Coherent in this context means understandable, causally related, or ordered. Note that although identity appears or is "felt to be" natural and spontaneous, it is associated with practices. Gilroy recognizes language, gesture, bodily significations, and desires.\textsuperscript{462} Moreover, such practices point to an anti-anti-essentialism that sees racialized subjectivity as the product of the social practices that supposedly derive from it.\textsuperscript{463}

Again, I believe that Wayne Proudfoot is particularly prescient when stating, "It is possible to turn [a] protective strategy around and to use the warnings against reductionism as indicators of tacit criteria for what an author takes to be distinctive about the religious."\textsuperscript{464} Thus, if someone claims that any attempt to offer a natural explanation

\textsuperscript{460} Gilroy, \textit{The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness}. 102.
\textsuperscript{461} Gilroy, \textit{The Black Atlantic}, 102.
\textsuperscript{462} This observation relates to one of my earlier criticism of many 'hermeneutists," including those associated with a hermeneutics of liberation.*
\textsuperscript{463} Gilroy, \textit{The Black Atlantic : Modernity and Double Consciousness}.
\textsuperscript{464} Proudfoot, xvi.
of religious phenomena is reductive, one can infer that for this person the distinctively religious characteristic of those phenomena is that they elude natural explanation.\textsuperscript{465}

While the conceptual framework of material, temporal liberation is markedly insufficient,\textsuperscript{466} I contend that most of the failings can be overcome with the practices, concepts, and perspectives associated with theories of the everyday. Such an orientation is more encompassing and inclusive than that offered by dominant paradigm. They are accommodating to theistic or non-theistic perspectives, for they are predicated on an engagement with phenomena, practices, and events in their heterogeneous and variegated givenness. As such, the theories are open to the range of human experience from joy to sorrow, ecstasy and suffering, freedom and constraint, the grotesque and the sublime. Such is not the case for dominant paradigm. Thus, the theories of the everyday address issues of intimacy and immediacy that the dominant paradigm aspires to, but does not accomplish.

In addition, as mentioned earlier, the dominant paradigm runs into serious historical veridical issues. Yet, the theories and methodologies of the everyday are more accommodating. For in the application or appropriation of theories and methodologies of the everyday, religious statements are deemed neither propositional truth nor need they represent some ultimate transcendent norm. Rather they are relative, particular, and

\textsuperscript{465} Intriguingly, I would assert that this is intimated with Cone's response to the well-known assertions of William R. Jones when he says,

\begin{quote}
Anyone who reads my work can see that any theological problem (and especially suffering!) can and must be dealt with from the perspective of Jesus Christ. This may not be true so much for other black theologians he treated; but for me, Jesus Christ is the essence of the meaning of liberation. Thus, he is the decisive historical event beyond which no one needs to appeal. (Cone, \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 268).
\end{quote}

contextual. There is no assumption regarding normative religious experiences or events. Doctrines, dogmas, and teachings associated with such events can be viewed as attempts to thematize the experiences of an individual or a community. However, in the case of the theories and methodologies of the everyday, great pain is taken not to define or circumscribe the limits of such experiences. As mentioned in Chapter 4, though I define the telos of religious experience as a quest for wholeness, the wholeness is not predetermined, the quest is open, and process oriented. It is fundamentally existential. Again, this is much more accommodating than totalizing theories whether “profane”; e.g., classical Marxism, Hegel, or forms of Africentrism; or “sacred”; e.g. versions of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism.

With respect to the implementation of theories of the everyday and the interpretation/explanation of religious experience, there is a methodological functionalism that does not obtain with respect to the dominant paradigm. The emphasis is on the phenomenon itself, with no particular dogma being sacrosanct. There is again, the embracing of ambiguity and the heterological.

As I stated in the introduction, when one looks at various African American religious communities, in the main, they are devoid of revolutionary or militant theologies. As bodies, they are neither chiliastic nor ascetic world transforming. The interpretive and diagnostic challenge for the religious scholar involves understanding their engagement with the world, whether it is the quite limited possibilities that many accord to the improvement of the present world, or the tendency toward the development of theodicies of reconciliation or redemptive suffering. The best theories and methodological approaches must be able to address the multifarious nature or
"messiness" of African American religious experience. I believe that the theories of the everyday uniquely fit such criteria.

**Howard Thurman**

Born just before the beginning of the twentieth century, Thurman’s thought would have a significant impact on generations of individuals until his death in 1981. Particularly noteworthy were his teachings on race and justice in America during the period of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950’s and 60’s. Indeed, Martin Luther King, Jr. was known to carry a copy of Thurman’s *Jesus and the Disinherited* with him during these particularly trying years. At the same time, to many students of African American religion, Thurman is often seen as an enigma. Although a Baptist minister, Thurman’s presentation of “the gospel” was by no means conventional. Few of his sermons could be characterized as evangelical. Jesus, when referenced, is not portrayed as an instrument of atonement, but rather as exemplar of divine love and full humanity.

There are numerous ways in which the religious experiences of Thurman fail to cohere with the dominant theoretical and methodological modalities deployed by African American religionists, both past and contemporary, albeit with a few exceptions. It is

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467 Howard Thurman, Walter E. Fluker, and Catherine Tumber, *A Strange Freedom: The Best of Howard Thurman on Religious Experience and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998). 8. In the introduction to this edited volume, Fluker and Tumber make a similar argument. They refer to Du Bois’s commenting, “[W]hat Howard Thurman really believes I have never been able to figure out.” They go on to argue that Thurman is often characterized as “a vague mystic who had abandoned the communal solidarity and Christocentrism of the Black Church.” Others, they suggest, view him as “an integrationists who did not grasp the realities of institutional power and cultural estrangement” indicative of American race relations. Finally, they note, Thurman has become the “beloved” of some practitioners within the New Age movement. For example the creation spiritualists embrace his liturgical experimentation and panentheistic views without engaging the historical, social, and cultural milieu in which they arose.

468 I have noted some of these individuals already in chapter 2. Among the exceptions among African American religion scholars, I would include persons such as Charles H. Long, Anthony B. Pinn, and Theophus Smith.
for this reason, I believe, that a rather limited amount of attention has been given to Thurman, when compared to figures of comparable or lesser notoriety.

Indubitably, when encountering Thurman, one is in the presence of a religious genius, whether it is his experience with nature, his reflection on questions of meaning, or ruminations on human relationships in works such as *The Inward Journey*[^469], *The Luminous Darkness*[^470], *Deep is the Hunger*[^471], and *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*[^472]. In many respects, there is a wealth of information, knowledge, and wisdom to be gained in an engagement with one such as Thurman when talking about religious experience. Indeed, Thurman’s accounts of religious experience have resonances with the descriptions of intimacy and transcendence given in scholars as disparate as Mircea Eliade and Georges Bataille.

In the chapter on examples of African American religious experience, I made reference to Bataille and his notion of religion as a quest or yearning for the return to a lost intimacy. This intimacy for Bataille is synonymous with transcendence. That there has been an irrevocable rupture between the world of complete intimacy and the world of things, there does exist for human beings the capacity to break from the world of things if but ever so briefly, at least for Bataille, through events such as festivals and ritual. This phenomenon might be characterized as a second transcendence. There is, however, an important difference, I believe, that exists with respect to Thurman and Bataille, however, and that is that while for Bataille second transcendence is exceptional and extraordinary,

Thurman proffers what I would describe as a potential for “self surpassing” in a way not so dissimilar to someone that shares Bataille’s intellectual genealogy, namely Henri Lefebvre. Both Lefebvre and Bataille share theoretical and methodological approaches indebted to structuralism and Marxism. Conversely, Thurman’s thought has resonances with that of Eliade, an idealist. I maintain, with reference to the examples of religious experience from Thurman, that objects and actions are real to the extent that they participate in a transcendent reality. This is similar to statements of Eliade:

Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred – and hence instantly becomes saturated with being – because it constitutes a hierophany [an appearance of the sacred]... The object appears as the receptacle of an exterior force that differentiates it from its milieu and gives it meaning and value. This force may reside in the substance of the object or in its form.\(^473\)

I would also note that Thurman has the potential to be read as one introducing a \textit{via media} or a \textit{tertium quid} with respect to the Eliade and Bataille at least with respect to an understanding of religion and religious experience that might be relevant to Africana or African Americans. Thurman is not fully an idealist or a historical materialist. Thus, like Eliade, he would assert that human space and time, if they are to be meaningful, must reflect and be oriented in relation to the sacred, he does not valorize that which is archaic or primitive. Thurman will encourage a return to the center (\textit{The Centering Moment})\(^474\), to go deep (\textit{Deep is the Hunger}), to examine one’s heart (\textit{Meditations of the Heart})\(^475\), but it need not be a spatial or temporal center, and yet it is still in some sense for

\(^{474}\) Howard Thurman, \textit{The Centering Moment} (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1984).
\(^{475}\) ———, \textit{Meditations of the Heart} (Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1976).
Thurman, as it is for Eliade, the preeminent zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality, the *axis mundi*, the place where heaven and earth meet. Unlike Eliade, the sacred need not coincide with mythical time of the beginning (*in illo tempore, ab origine*).

Ritual and rites are understood to connect one with the sacred, with the real, but it need not be associated with myths of a Golden Age or perfection. Calling upon a theme that I have used previously, Thurman attempts to appropriate both *mythos* and *logos*, while Eliade believes that the religious is essentially *mythos* and operates in opposition to *logos*. Thus, an archaic person, the exemplar of *homo religiosus*, is deemed by Eliade to reject history by all means possible. On the other hand, Thurman’s religious economy is not the materialist one of Bataille, a materialism which he obtains from Hegel by way of Alexandre Kojève.

In addition, it is my contention that Thurman in both his accounts as well as his analysis of religious experience is focused on the phenomenon that I have referred to as the everyday. For Thurman, appearances or eruptions of the sacred define spatial and temporal reality. Indeed, for Thurman, there is a sense in which human beings do not construct their world so much as they discover, recognize, and orient themselves in relation to the sacred, the real, and the transcendent. Again, this is not so dissimilar to the phenomenological claim of Heidegger, although Heidegger is more than reticent to assert or identify that which is given or present to consciousness with the sacred or divine, despite his theological education. Likewise, for de Certeau, the sacred is evinced in its absence as opposed to that which is given. 476 477

476 An exception to this in the phenomenological tradition is found in the work of Jean Luc Marion. For Marion, the sacred is a saturated experience is accessible to as pure gift. In the conclusion of the dissertation, I mention the possibility of doing a comparative work on the writings of Thurman and Marion as two phenomenologists of the sacred.
Throughout Thurman’s corpus, particularly those works dealing with racial oppression, Thurman examines religion’s role as one of those formations in society by which it defines and organizes reality, a reality that is subsequently appropriated by individuals on the level of their own subjective consciousness, i.e., Berger’s *nomos* or Bourdieu’s *habitus* or *doxa*. For Thurman, the Christian tradition provides a context and a structure to reality, as a sacred canopy, upon against or through which the world shows up. Thus, one way to frame Thurman’s project is as an attempt to mend or repair this *nomos*, or order of sacred meaning, given or revealed in the Christian *mythos*.

Specifically, in *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*, Thurman explores the figure of segregation in American society. An eminent pastor, theologian, and mystic, it is Thurman’s assertion that segregation is antithetical to *human beingness*. For Thurman, to be fully human requires being in relation, one with another (as well as with all of creation). It is only in such a context, which necessitates the dissolution of walls and barriers such as those associated with segregation, that one might experience spiritual *wholeness* and *freedom* as well as life in authentic community.

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477 Indeed, I believe a strong case can be made for understanding Thurman as a stricter phenomenologist than those who accept such an appellation for research in history of religions (i.e. *Religionswissenschaften*). As I have argued elsewhere, comparativist such as Eliade engage in morphological analysis as opposed to phenomenological analysis that deals with how events and experience are apperceived by consciousness, or articulating the conditions for the possibility of meaning making.

The case for reading Thurman as a phenomenologist is also made by James Bryant and Paget Henry in “From the Pattern to Being: Howard Thurman and Africana Phenomenology,” presented at the Africana Phenomenology Roundtable at Brown University in 2006. The authors place Thurman within the Africana Christian tradition, which they characterize as possessing a proto-Kierkegaardian viewpoint, for its concern with the existential issues facing individuals. (For a similar assertion, one can turn to Cornel West in *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, p 106).

478 See the distinction I make between mythos and logos in chapter 4. Again, the terms are informed by Henry’s use of the distinction poetics and historical. As I note in chapter 4, however, I believe that the terms poetics and historical are too circumscribed.
For Thurman, segregation is a churning abyss, a wall, an insidious and pernicious virus that not only separates white from black, but also does significant damage to their psyches and souls as well as being a drain upon society as a whole.\textsuperscript{479} While the dignity and integrity of African Americans is assaulted and their humanity is denied, whites, though possessing more power and privilege, also experience a stunting of their humanity as they expend energy and resources to perpetuate racial oppression. Thus, Thurman goes on to say “human life is one and all men are members one of another. And this insight is spiritual and it is the hardcore of religious experience.”\textsuperscript{480}

For example, Thurman refers to the original claim of religion, specifically the ethical insight brought into the stream of contemporary life by the Judeo-Christian tradition in which the individual experiences himself/herself, as a human being.\textsuperscript{481} Unfortunately, he asserts, the trustees of this insight; i.e., religious institutions, “have singularly failed to witness to the insight.”\textsuperscript{482} The result is the fractured \textit{nomos} or sacred canopy.

At the same time, Thurman is also concerned with \textit{logos} to the extent that he deals with religion and religious experience as historically, socially, and culturally situated; e.g., as an institution. Thurman was an active member of the clergy, associated with ecumenical organizations such as the YMCA, as well as co-pastor of the first intentionally integrated congregation in America, the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, and a chaplain at both Howard University and Boston University.

\textsuperscript{480} Ibid. x.
\textsuperscript{481} Ibid. 97-98.
\textsuperscript{482} Ibid.
Perhaps most relevant in terms of the line of argumentation pursued throughout this dissertation, however, is his interpretation of religious experience as an opening to the spirit, which he understood as the ground of one’s ego or sense of “I.” Returning again to the *Luminous Darkness*, Thurman says,

>The ultimate meaning of [religious] experience is felt in such a way that all of oneself is included. It is not the experience of oneself as male or female, as black or white, as American or European. It is rather, the experience of oneself as being.  

Yet, according to Thurman, the brokenness of the *nomos* of Christianity, as evinced in systems of oppression and discrimination, resulted in and perpetuated an imbalance in the spirit/ego. With respect to the I, the self, or the ego of Africana people, as I stated in Chapter 4, this was due to the persistent and pernicious experiences of Africana people attempting to live in the racialized everyday world of America. The successful accomplish of such a feat required a considerable amount of effort on the part of such individuals. This was made all the more difficult, according to Thurman, because contagions such as racism had infected the Christianity as a *nomos*. Thus, as opposed to macroscopic, material and temporal liberation, Thurman’s own religious experiences as well as his theological reflection is concerned with how the individual functions within a “diseased” society, that possess an impaired and flawed sacred canopy.

>It is part of the wisdom of Judaeo-Christian ethic that all men [sic] are enjoined to love one another. However ardently a man may hold to this attitude, his commitment is nevertheless threatened by the reality that he

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483 Ibid. 98-99.
484 Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness; a Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*. 28. In referring to how the spirit (ego) of African Americans accommodates itself to racism, he states that there is “a kind of immunity that comes from putting all white persons in a separate category and functioning within the boundaries of Negro life as if they did not exist. This is to accept segregation....The spirit does with the literal fact of the existence of white persons what the body does with an infection. A thick wall is built around the infected area in an attempt to prevent the spread of the infection into the rest of the system to poison and destroy it.” While these may allow one to function, the body is not truly healthy; it is as in a state of imbalance.
still will admit categories of exception and extenuating circumstances which amend and sometimes nullify his respect for human life...This, in broad outline, indicates the moral climate in which Negroes and white persons have lived in the United States. The Christian ethic has been deeply influenced by this circumstance. For a long time the Christian Church has profoundly compromised with the demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, especially with regard to the meaning and practice of love.\textsuperscript{485}

As one who understood himself called to a vocation of healing, Thurman goes on to offer a prescription for wholeness. According to Thurman, segregation as a "mood," "a state of mind," and whose "external manifestation is external,"\textsuperscript{486} must be engaged on a spiritual level. For Thurman, perhaps the greatest tragedy of segregation is that black and white persons alike do not know what it means to be human. According to Thurman, to be human is to experience one's fellows as human beings. This requires one transcending fears (of the other, of harm, humiliation, loss of status, one's self) as well as notions of kinship, ethnicity, race, and nationality. It means nurturing senses of belonging to life, of being a part of existence. "It is to be alive in a living world."\textsuperscript{487} Again, for Thurman, this is the heart of religion. It is also a reality seldom grasped by the stewards of religious institutions. Yet, it is in such a context that one sees themselves and others as beings of infinite worth connected in being. As a result, "love has essential materials with which to work"\textsuperscript{488} and to build a "friendly world under friendly skies."\textsuperscript{489}

As I noted in Chapter 2, Thurman recalled that in his unique intimacy with nature, he found reassurance. This was a relationship that "could not be affronted by the behavior

\textsuperscript{485} Ibid. 2-3.
\textsuperscript{486} Thurman, The Luminous Darkness, 89.
\textsuperscript{487} Thurman, The Luminous Darkness, 94.
\textsuperscript{488} Thurman, The Luminous Darkness, 111.
\textsuperscript{489} Thurman, The Luminous Darkness, 113.
of human beings.\textsuperscript{490} The ocean, the seasons, in their ebb and flow, in their cyclical rhythms, imbued him with a sense of being a part of something much more immense and enduring. Subsequently, Thurman identifies the ways in which the Africana spirit, i.e., self or “I” accommodates itself to such devastation such as the story involving the incident with the little girl. The key religious event there is the experience of wholeness in the encounter with his grandmother.

**Helga Crane**

In the case of Helga Crane, I present two religious events. They are disparate temporally and spatially, as well as the first being within a kind of evangelical and ecstatic African American Christian context, seemingly reminiscent of sanctified or holiness tradition. This is later followed, however, by what I referred to as a humanist and existentialist move, which is at the very least non-theistic, and possibly atheistic. However, when the events are analyzed phenomenologically that one can see that they are not so dissimilar with respect to their function, that indeed, they possess the same *telos*, what I called in the last chapter – wholeness.\textsuperscript{491}

It is readily evident that Helga Crane’s religious experiences, and given the autobiographical nature of Larsen’s writing - perhaps her own, does not cohere with the dominant paradigms articulated quest for material, temporal liberation on a macroscopic scale. This is not to say that Helga is not engaged in certain efforts that might have some


\textsuperscript{491} In the conclusion, I mention that the methodological and theoretical approaches utilized in this monograph, could be applied to numerous examples one finds in literature. I mention that characters found in the work of African American authors such as Ralph Ellison in his classic, *Invisible Man*, as well as Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. In the former, I am particularly intrigued by the character of Rinehart, and in the later, the character Pilate Dead. Both characters can be characterized as changelings.
social or cultural impact. For example, Helga is introduced to the reader as an educator at an African American educational institution in the South. The narrative relates that Helga's desire to teach at this institution comes out of her personal longing or desire to assist in the uplift of her people by becoming involved in the education of African American children. Initially, she is full of positive ideas, of hopes and dreams about how she can bring light to the dark lives of these youth. Indeed, she attempts to do so literally with the introduction of vibrant colors into the dress for girls. Shortly after her arrival, however, she begins to feel unwelcome by the community, because she is an outsider, an agent of change, and has no "place" within the established social structure of the community.

Repeatedly, Helga attempts to find community, attempts to find a "place" where she belongs. She later aspires to be part of various movements of social uplift in an attempt to fulfill her responsibilities as a member of "the talented tenth." Yet, when she attempts to find a place among Harlem's middle and upper classes, she is once more she finds the way more than difficult. She soon becomes disenchanted with the machinations and idiosyncrasies of these groups, particularly their hypocrisy with respect to their less fortunate African American fellows. 492

Yet, while a cursory glance at her life might lead one to assert that Helga is motivated by a desire for systemic change and transformation, it quickly becomes evident

492 Larsen, Quicksand, p. 51-52 Helga is commenting on the hypocrisy of members of the Talented Tenth such as her friend and patron Anne Grey. Grey states that she has a higher opinion of any "Negro" prostitute than any American president, "not excepting Abraham Lincoln." Yet, she turned up her nose at African American "lusty churches, their picturesque parades, and their naïve clowning on the streets." Moreover, though she vociferously expressed a hatred of white people, and would never live among them, "she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways." While she proclaimed "the undiluted good of all things Negro," she disliked the songs, dances, and blurred speech" of her people. Like the "despised" white race, she preferred "Pavlova to Florence Mills, John McCormack to Taylor Gordon, and Walter Hampton to Paul Robeson."
that Helga's is a personal, existential quest for her "self", for somewhere that she can be an "I", accepted as a subject. There is of course the intersubjective aspect of this process, the complexity of the self as an "I" and as a "we." However, the telos of the complex self or subject is the experience of wholeness or completeness. Such a telos is not macroscopic, temporal, material, liberation. While the pursuit of such may accompany the quest, it is an affectation of the journey; it is not a necessary component. Indeed, one way to characterize the distinction between the microscopic approach of the everyday, and the macroscopic approach of the dominant paradigm is the distinction between \textit{phenomenon} and \textit{epiphenomenon}.

With respect to the microscopic analysis associated with the theories of the everyday, they provide a robust explanation for what transpires in the life of Helga. Again, as alluded to in Chapter 2, Helga's status as a mulatta effectively imposes upon her the designation of other with respect to the Euro-American community as well as to a lesser extent with respect to the African American community. Such standards are perpetuated through various discourses that formed and informed the social relationships during early twentieth century America.

Borrowing again the language of de Certeau, within the life of Helga, the binary distinctions of strategy vs. tactics and place vs. space are always operative. In her quest for wholeness, as previously noted, Helga attempts to interpose herself among various strategies. Likewise, she was constantly in search of a place, and thus she journeys to Naxos, Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen, Harlem, and finally to rural Alabama. However, as the novel reveals, Helga carries her problems and issues with her, everywhere she goes. Physical relocation does not bring peace. What she needs is not so much an
appreciation for places, expecting them in and of themselves to be transformative. The issues of identity and her pursuit of self are made evident when one turns to the microscopic concepts of tactics and space. The attempt to ensconce herself within strategies and places - the regularized, systematized, often hierarchical, and regimented domains of space - leaves her still wanting, with little relief from her persistent agonistic struggle.

It is interesting; therefore, that the first religious experience I chose to reference comes in the context of her being in a distraught state after an experience of rejection. In addition to her emotional upheaval, there is also her immediate physical yet banal situation of being caught in a downpour. It is the latter that appears to precipitate her getting entrance into a storefront church. It is interesting to speculate whether Helga would have entered the sanctuary of a church with a more conventional façade. However, this was a church whose very existence seemed to be the embodiment of *bricolage* (from the French meaning to fiddle or tinker, to construct using what is available at certain time or place.)

The original intention of the *place* was most likely retail, in an area of commerce, but it had through intervention of some group of people, become a *space* of their own, a space to encounter God. The ensuing events that grasp Helga are, from her perspective, not intended or planned. At work are the happenstance, the frenzy, pain, fear, dread, and joy. She experiences something different in this place, something real. For a short time, she has a sense of completeness that has eluded her up to this point. Yet, as

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493 In Claude Lévi-Strauss *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966). Lévi-Strauss has employs a technical and nuanced use of the word, associated with the *bricoleur*, which he describes as “someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of the craftsman.” (16) The translator goes on to add that there is not a true English equivalent to such a person. A kind of “Jack of all trades”, he has a different standing than that of “the handyman”. (17) Lévi-Strauss, uses it to describe mythical thought,
noted earlier, it is transitory, it is not permanent, a lesson that she comes to learn in what
follows.

Indeed, Helga does try to hold on to, or at the very least securing the means of
accessing her sense of being an “I” whether it be associated with the a relationship with
an affirming “other” in the form of community, the mysterium tremendum, or at the very
least one who can provide or facilitate such events, which it seems that she secures by
way of her marriage to Rev. Pleasant Green. In other words, I contend that Helga is
attempting to hold on to “herself as a self.” That is to say, she wishes to place in stasis the
event of herself as an “I.” But in keeping with the understanding of the self that I inherit
from the phenomenological and existential tradition, this is to err, this is to reject the
ambiguity, and transitory nature of human beingness.

Unfortunately, Helga slowly comes to the realization of the problematic nature of
her quest. Initially experiencing rejection and resentment from the Alabama community
of Rev. Green, she does attempts to cope, through the everyday tasks of a homemaker
and through modeling what she perceives to be the vocation of first lady of her husband’s
church; e.g., becoming involved in the mission board, Sunday School, etc. Moreover,
having three children in less than two years, she attempts to fulfill her “role” as a good
wife, as defined by her community.494 When things begin to become overwhelming, she
tries to follow her husband’s admonition to “trust the Lord more fully.”495 Seeking advice
from older women in the congregation, one Sary who had raised six healthy and

494 This also may or may not be interpreted as a rejection of her earlier commitments to projects of social
uplift associated with the aspirations of the “Talented Tenth.” According to Du Bois, educated members of
the African American community “men and women of knowledge and culture and technical skill who
understand modern civilization,” were responsible for imparting such knowledge to their children, to
provide the future leaders of the race.
495 Quicksand, 124.
responsible children with very little in assistance, or resources, that she had to learn patience and forbearance.\textsuperscript{496} Though bereft of so much, she was able to find some solace in her faith. The reader is told that the weaker, the wearier she became, the more she relied on her faith.

With the birth of the fourth child, however, Helga enters into a state of catatonia. Apparently unable to do anything, to respond to the child, to her husband, to those who assisted in the birth, Helga’s consciousness seems to have fled from her body. Yet, this retreat also provides an opportunity, a space in which she examines her life; she confronts what it means to be over against non-being. She realizes that choice is a part of the human condition. Indeed, that her desire for certainty, surety, over against uncertainty and ambiguity had resulted in the denial of her humanity instead of embracing it.

Helga is said to be in this state of catatonia for weeks. Read through a lens informed by theories of the like of Lefebvre and de Certeau, however, this is not fallow time. It is not submission. Indeed, in this state, Helga is free from the demands of her children, the demands of her husband, and a myriad of other responsibilities. Larsen writes that amidst the chaos that was around her, Helga was unconcerned, and undisturbed. “Nothing penetrated the kind darkness into which her bruised spirit had retreated...She was in a in an enchanted and blissful place [space] where peace and incredible quietness encompassed her.”\textsuperscript{497}

Finally, she comes back from her hiatus, back to face the hard realities of life, and yet, she has been changed. As it where, this is again, a second conversion experience, where she does not find God, but rather herself. While there are those would characterize

\textsuperscript{496} Quicksand, 126.
\textsuperscript{497} Quicksand, 128.
this event as a surrendered to the absurd, or a giving into a certain type of existential and ontological confinement, i.e. accepted a new and more docile existence? As stated in Chapter 4, however, this would seem to fall in to the early error of Foucault, the overstating of disciplinary control. Indeed, Helga does not resign herself to docility or to the false consciousness of freedom or autonomy. Instead, there is a taking responsibility for herself and her choices in her situatedness. Referring again to what I wrote in Chapter 2, Helga’s second conversion is described as an event of peace and joy.\textsuperscript{498} In the peace of oblivion, she had the opportunity to reflect, she had the time to ponder the events of her life.

Her sickness also provided her relief from her husband. Now the subject of disdain and resentment, Helga’s weakness proved to be a source of strength as her nurse at the slightest indication of her discomfort, could expel him from the room. It is also interesting to note that in a world that was conventionally hierarchical and patriarchal, that this domain of sick room seemed to be a place where women exerted power, a tactical kind of power, in the care of the sick and infirm. This is neither a notion of power associated with macroscopic transformation of society; it is not an assault of a superstructure associated with patriarchy or the oppression of religion. However, nor is Helga’s posture indicative of docility. Rather, along the lines of argumentation pursued by de Certeau, these scenarios are about the creation of space for the care of self.

A truly powerful scene in the novel occurs while Helga is convalescing. Learning about the death of her just born infant, instead of expressing grief, she almost seems relieved. One less “amber drop of humanity” that must suffer this mortal coil.

Subsequently, her husband tells her that the church is planning a special service of prayer

\textsuperscript{498} Quicksand, 128.
and thanksgiving for her recovery. When asked if she had any requests, she all but smirks and answers no. Later, when she hears the sounds of religious fervor, she asks her nurse if she might read something. The nurse volunteers to read something to her. The selection is from one of Helga’s books, containing a story entitled, “The Procurator of Judea.” A story that mentions the religious practice of animal sacrifice, it briefly recounts the spiritual contributions of Africa and Asia. However, it is the conclusion that Helga aspires to hear, when the protagonist is asked about Jesus and responds, “Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth….I do not recall the name.” The nurse summarily deems the story silly, but it is clear that the reader is to infer that this denial of familiarity or acquaintance with Jesus in the reading is of import to Helga. She once would have claimed Jesus as rescuer, redeemer, and sanctifier, but such belief she has now laid down

On the level of the microscopic, one can once more identify what de Certeau referred to as tactics that are ensconced as a part of the everyday. In this instance, there are several. The first might be what de Certeau refers to as *la perruque* or the wig. Helga frequently adopts the posture of sleeping at the appearance of her husband. She is thus convalescing rather than avoiding him or others. In this instance where she does receive him and is informed of service to be performed on her behalf, she receives it impassively, and giving an intentionally ambiguous response that might be interpreted by her husband after a fashion to his liking.

Helga then deploys the practices of memory and reading. Over against the boisterous praise she hears emanating from next door, her mind turns to a story that she recalls, a story that is in one of her books. Not only does she have access to memory, however, but through reading, she can directly access one of the catalysts of the memory.
Moreover, there is intention in this section with respect to what Larsen shares with her readers, for one does not have access to the text as a whole, but certain fragments of the story. Additionally, these fragments do not appear to be random, as each that is voiced in the narrative gives expression to religion and religious markedly different from that associated with the sounds wafting through her window from her husband’s nearby church.

Once more, of particular import are the last few lines of the passage Miss Hartley reads. Though some might suggest that the meaning of the passage is lost or is inaccessible apart from the rest of the Miss Hartley’s recitation, Larsen informs her reader that this was truly the line that Helga longed to hear. To Miss Hartley, this is an end to a “silly story.” For Helga, however, it is something more; i.e., a tactic, an oppositional practice, or an exercise of resistance against that which she now finds oppressive. Indeed, to once more make a Certeauvian connection, she is engaged in a tactics of reading as poaching, where reading is not merely passively consuming, absorbing, and reproducing but rather is a creative production involving the construction of meaning that very well may be transgressive.  

In the end, Helga does not wholly see her initial religious faith and praxis as completely meaningless. She notes, as I stated in Chapter 2, that as a palliative, it did provide some protection, it could function as a shelter against the storms of life, particularly for the poor and oppressed, in this case, for African Americans. She in facts wishes that it had been more adequate, that it had not failed her, for though it was an illusion, she maintains, it was better in many respects to the reality. Unfortunately, while belief in God, specifically the “white man’s” God, might have aided African Americans

in surviving as a source of hope and a bulwark against nihilism, it also left them vulnerable. According to Helga, the particular form of religion that seemed to flourish among African Americans often resulted in their being malleable (docile?) before systems and structures that had no concern for their well-being. Helga came to view the notion of deferred reward in heaven, pie in the sky, as repugnant and moribund. Quicksand ends, however, with her facing the terror of history with solely her humanity.500

There are numerous analyses of the novel and the protagonists from various perspectives, particularly as it relates to issues of race or gender; e.g., Anna Brickhouse’s “Nella Larsen and the Intertextual Geography of Quicksand,”501 Hortense E. Thornton’s “Sexism as Quagmire: Nella Larsen's Quicksand,”502 Debra B. Silverman’s “Nella

500 According to Eliade, traditional cultures desire to escape the linearity of events we moderns refer to as history, which does not possess any inherent value. In Chapter 4 of The Myth of the Eternal Return (entitled “The Terror of History”) Eliade suggests that the abandonment of mythical thought, what I have earlier simply referred to as mythos, and the full acceptance of linear time, which I place under the rubric of logos with its “terror”, is one of the reasons for the anxieties that accompany modernity.

“In our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history—from collective deportations and massacres to atomic bombings—if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of economic, social, or political forces, or, even worse, only the result of the 'liberties' that a minority takes and exercises directly on the stage of universal history?

“We know how, in the past, humanity has been able to endure the sufferings we have enumerated: they were regarded as a punishment inflicted by God, the syndrome of the decline of the 'age,' and so on. And it was possible to accept them precisely because they had a metahistorical meaning [...] Every war rehearsed the struggle between good and evil, every fresh social injustice was identified with the sufferings of the Saviour (or, for example, in the pre-Christian world, with the passion of a divine messenger or vegetation god), each new massacre repeated the glorious end of the martyrs. [...] By virtue of this view, tens of millions of men were able, for century after century, to endure great historical pressures without despairing, without committing suicide or falling into that spiritual aridity that always brings with it a relativistic or nihilistic view of history.” The Myth of the Eternal Return, pp. 151-52

Larsen's Quicksand: Untangling the Webs of Exoticism,"$^{503}$ Kimberly Monda's "Self-Delusion and Self-Sacrifice in Nella Larsen's Quicksand,"$^{504}$ and Charles R. Larson's Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer & Nella Larsen.$^{505}$ One of the more intriguing to me is Jeanne Scheper's "The New Negro "Flaneuse in Nella Larsen's Quicksand.$^{506}$

In her essay, Scheper frames Larsen's text as an examination of black women's movements during the early part of the twentieth century. Such movement, she notes, was policed "by educational institutions, by racism, by Jim Crow segregation, by the race and gender ideologies of Empire, by the social strictures of white, black, and European society, and by the institutions of marriage and family."$^{507}$ Scheper asserts that Larsen's is a critic of the various social, structural, and discursive attempts to contain and fix the identity of her female protagonist. Indeed, Scheper asserts, "Larsen's positioning of her protagonist Helga Crane as "leaving," only to "have to come back" signals neither failure nor resignation to the inevitable return home, but a strategy of resistance that many modernist women adopted – mobility."$^{508}$ Scheper notes that such strategies were adopted by a modernist African American women writer such Jessie Fauset. Appointed literary editor of the Crisis in 1919, Fauset traveled extensively domestically. Moreover, between 1925 and 1926 she studied abroad at the Sorbonne in France, obtaining a certificate for her work. Scheper also notes that a contemporary of Fauset and Larsen,

$^{507}$ Scheper, 679.
$^{508}$ Scheper, 680.
Josephine Baker, would in fact take up residence abroad to escape the memories of racial violence in her hometown of East St. Louis.

Through the character of Helga, Scheper asserts that Larsen is engaged in an exploration the relationship between subjectivity and mobility and relocation. As a woman on the move, Helga Crane represents something at times imagined to be impossible, a modern *flaneuse* or female *flaneur*. By writing of the experience of black *flaneuse*, Scheper asserts that Larsen explores the promise and possibilities agency and subjectivity for African American women across and within multiple spaces and terrains (rural, urban, and international).

Scheper points to various accepted interpretations of *Quicksand*, which point to some of the points I made earlier; e.g., Helga and indeed Larsen herself as the "tragic mulatta," which in its own way emphasizes the concept of split or divided subjectivity, as one, indeed, who might be seen as ontologically flawed. In the tradition of the genre, this subject is inevitably rejected, cast out, or dead. Indeed, this once more seems to mirror Larsen's own life, as she died in poverty and anonymity. With respect to Helga Crane, one might look at the characterization of her offered by George Hutchinson observes in *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*\(^{509}\), Helga is interpreted as a character lacking agency and possessing essentially the same dissonance with respect to her racial identity as her creator.\(^{510}\)

Scheper, however, argues that despite the incontrovertibly tragic ending, that the novel does not conform wholesale to the tragic mulatta genre either fictive or as manifest in conventional wisdom. While Helga is often viewed as one who lacks agency, who is

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\(^{510}\) Scheper, 680.
“neither here nor there” and “neither black nor white,” Scheper offers an alternative interpretation, namely that Crane’s neither here nor there “produces a strategy of resistance through mobility that many modernist women adopted and that overpowers the novel’s tragic conclusion.”

Scheper identifies several influences with respect to this line of argumentation. For example, she quotes José E Muñoz that such performance practices of resistance “are not a priori sites of contestation but, instead, spaces of productivity where identity’s fragmentary nature is accepted and negotiated.” Subsequently, Scheper asserts that as la flâneuse, Larsen uses Helga to explore the way that the material conditions of history shaped race and gendered realities. Moreover, as la flâneuse, Helga can be seen to move between geographic locations, psychic states, and performative modes, as agent and casualty of social forces, as spectator and spectacle, and as author and subject.

Though she does not invoke de Certeau, this is consistent with his articulation of the flaneur or wandersmänner in the well known chapter of the Practice of Everyday Life entitled “Walking in the City.” For de Certeau, it is this wanderer who reveals the power of everyday life which takes place in the gaps and interstices of strategic constructs and discourses of governments or institutions that attempt to impose structures and disciplines of control. The walker or wanderer, however, is associated with the tactical, whose movement (an expression of agency) is never totally controlled, circumscribed, or constrained by maps or grids. Articulated for de Certeau in terms of a technical semiotic analysis, walking is a kind of rhetoric,

511 Scheper, 682
512 Josâe Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications : Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, Cultural Studies of the Americas ; V. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
513 Scheper, 682.
514 Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life.
The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them (it can take place only within them) nor in conformity with them (it does not receive its identity from them). . . . Within them it is itself the effect of successive encounters and occasions that constantly alter it and make it the other's blazon: in other words, it is like a peddler, carrying something surprising, transverse or attractive compared with the usual choices.  

Unfortunately, Scheper does not address the place or rhetoric of religion in the novel *Quicksand*, or how it may relate to the practice of a *flâneuse*. One author who has examined this particular narrative from a religious perspective is Michael Lackey, assistant professor of English at the University of Minnesota – Morris. In *African American Atheists and Political Liberation: A Study of the Sociocultural Dynamics of Faith*, Lackey argues for Helga’s conversion experience to be interpreted as an act of “spiritual” or “psychic” rape. Lackey maintains that Helga’s conversion is an event against her will. According to Lackey, this is clear from the language of possession throughout the scene, which denotes that Helga has been divested of her agency. In his interpretation, Lackey points to Larsen’s language that is not only sexually suggestive, but also violent. According to Lackey, Helga is trapped, surrounded, “paralyzed, terrified, and disgusted.” Further, “as Helga watched and listened, gradually, a curious influence penetrated her; she felt an echo of the weird orgy.”

As for the Helga’s seeming calm after her violation, he refers to it as evincing a retroactive traumatic experience as in the case of some instances of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He maintains that it is not unusual as in the case of Helga’s conversion/gang rape, that she would be happy for some time afterwards, indeed, some years afterward. He argues that the incident is structured in such a way as the believers

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515 Ibid. 101.
516 Larsen, 114.
who are participants in the rape, in the process of conversion, “strategically structure her inner life such that she interprets experience through the believer’s epistemological lens.”

It is my opinion, however, that Lackey’s interpretation or explanation of what transpires is fundamentally erroneous for a number of reasons. Taking into consideration the observations of Scheper, Lackey thesis would appear to be only a slight variation on other depictions of Helga as a tragic figure from whom agency has been expunged. In the case of Lackey, however, there is also an added dimension of his understanding of religion and the religious as inherently flawed and ultimately damaging experience. This is most apparent in his analysis of Helga’s conversion in the storefront church.

In this scene, Larsen appears to try and grasp aspects of religious conversion as expressed in and associated with a segment of the African American Christian tradition; e.g., holiness and sanctified churches. In the music, the movement, the exhortations of the preacher, and the constitution of community recognizes elements of Southern, rural, African American worship as described by W.E.B. Du Bois in the essay, Faith of Our Fathers in *Souls of Black Folk*. Present are the frenzy as well as an atmosphere of terror, dread, and Pythian madness. Moreover, there is much in Larsen’s narrative that suggests an encounter with the sacred, the Holy Other, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, which attracts and repels. Indeed, according to the respected African American historian of religion, Charles H. Long, such is to be expected.

One has only to read the accounts of the conversion experiences of blacks to see how this *mysterium tremendum*, in the life of slaves and ex-slaves, is never identified with the sociological situation or with the oppression of slavery itself; it is, in fact, a manner in which these human beings

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517 Lackey, 78.
recognize their creatureliness and their humanity, shall we say, before God, and it is this essential humanity which is not given by the slave system or the master.\textsuperscript{519}

From a phenomenological perspective as well as in keeping with Proudfoot’s admonition against descriptive reduction, Lackey’s association of the conversion experience with rape is one that I must reject. What transpires here, as alluded to in my analysis of the Thurman narratives, is an encounter with an “other” that results in the constitution or reconstitution of a “self” or an ‘I’. This process is violent, in that it involves the destruction of one’s former being; it is terrifying in that with the destruction, one is confronted with non-being; but as in the case of Thurman, and what I have identified as indicative of religious experience is an event of wholeness as opposed to fragmentation. Moreover, it is my contention that for Helga, this transpires with her conversion in the storefront - and then again later in her “resurrection” from her dissociative fugue.

I would also note that conversion of Helga has significant resonance with the concept of the rite of passage; i.e., a death of an old identity and a rebirth into a new one that is also associated with the integration of an individual into a new level of community. With respect to the contemporary understanding, interpretation, and explanation of the rite of passage ritual, the most influential theoretical work has been expressed in Mircea Eliade’s \textit{Rites and Symbols of Initiation},\textsuperscript{520} Arnold van Gennep’s \textit{Les rites de passage (The Rites of Passage)},\textsuperscript{521} and Victor Turner’s \textit{The Ritual Process}:

\textsuperscript{519} Long, 165.
\textsuperscript{520} Mircea Eliade, \textit{Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth} (Dallas [New York]: Spring Publications ; Distributed in the U.S. by Continuum Pub. Group, 1994).
\textsuperscript{521} Arnold van Gennep, \textit{The Rites of Passage} ([Chicago]: University of Chicago Press, 1960).
Structure and Anti-Structure.\textsuperscript{522} Through these works, one is made aware of the often brutal character of this process. Indeed, with respect to the conversion experience of Helga, a number of the insights offered by Turner are quite compelling.

Building on the work of van Gennep’s on rites of passage that emphasized the apparent transformation of social status associated with such rituals, Turner emphasizes “the inward, moral, and cognitive changes.”\textsuperscript{523} This is particularly true with respect to what Gennep called the “liminal phase” of rites of passage, the state of ambiguity. Turner is concerned with the interiority of liminality, of liminal personae whose situatedness is frequently likened to death, invisibility, and darkness.\textsuperscript{524} Turner observes

Liminal entities, ...may be represented as possessing nothing...as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia...Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life.\textsuperscript{525}

Turner goes on to note that associated with liminality is the phenomenon of comitatus, “society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated... community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders.\textsuperscript{526} In later work, Turner notes that experiences or events of liminality such as rites of passage also arouse what he refers to

\textsuperscript{524} Turner, The Ritual Process : Structure and Anti-Structure. 95.
\textsuperscript{525} Ibid. 95.
\textsuperscript{526} Ibid. 96.
as “reflexivity,” both individual and plural, where there is self and corporate cognizance, investigation, interrogation, and exploration.\textsuperscript{527}

Concomitantly, invoking the cultural phenomenological approach and ontology articulated in Chapter 2, not only is there an experience of an “I,” but also a “We.” In Helga’s conversion narrative is the profound sense of finally belonging, of being a part of a community, of a people. Again, though there is a tendency to schematize religious experience individual, there is a tradition from Otto to Long that has asserted a schematization of religious experience as communal.\textsuperscript{528} As for Lackey’s argument about the believers structuring Helga’s inner life such that she interprets what is happening to her through their epistemological lens, I once more maintain that this a distortion and oversimplification of the discursive field. Returning to Chapter 1 of the dissertation, there is the acknowledgement that there are no unmediated religious experiences. Thus, the way that Helga comes to interpret her experience as meaningful is predicated on her situatedness in the world, her historical, cultural, and social context. Further, as referenced in Chapter 4, one’s worldview, our \textit{nomos}, is always being influenced by various discourses, through various plausibility structures, yet this does not eliminate or negate aspects of agency. Yet, because of what I maintain as his negative view of


\textsuperscript{528} This has been alluded to in this thesis in chapter one. There is clearly a tendency in the tradition, say in Schleiermacher as well as William James, where an emphasis has been placed on religion and religious experience from the perspective of the individual, often one who might be characterized as a religious genius. This tendency has also been perpetuated by a view of religious experience that has held up as exemplary the mystical experience. Yet, from Durkheim forward, religion has also been proclaimed to be an eminently social fact. I would maintain that this is particularly true in the case of African American religious experience, indeed, following in the tradition of Du Bois and Long, I would maintain that religion and religious experience were constitutive of the African American identity and community.
religion, Lackey construes the conversion of Helga as her succumbing to the degradation of herself as well as her people. Nevertheless, I said above, that there is not simply one significant religious event for Helga, but two, as it were, a second conversion to what might be called a non-theistic position.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, with her marriage to Rev. Pleasant Green and her return once more to the South, she soon finds herself with three babies, with another on the way. Surprisingly, despite her almost constant state of exhaustion, however, she does her best to maintain a positive outlook. Here again, I have difficulty with Lackey’s characterization of the state of affairs between Helga and her husband. Helga’s efforts, as he interprets them, are the direct result of the manipulation of the Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green of his vulnerable wife. According to Lackey, Green coerces Helga to fulfill the role of a submissive wife. He maintains that when Helga rebels, her husband tells her that she must trust more in God. This is what Lackey will attack as the God mentality, declaring it as extremely dangerous. Yet, there is no rebellion that takes place on Helga’s part in the narrative up to that point. Indeed, Helga persists in asserting to herself and others, that she is happy. What the text does say is rather that Green was “deferentially kind and incredulously proud of her – and verbally encouraging.” The encouragement comes in the form of exhortations for her to trust in the Lord, and this is what she strives to accomplish. Moreover, even in the end when she rejects God, she does not surrender to the absurdity of life as pain and suffering. Helga does not resign herself to docility or to

529 By the “God mentality,” Lackey means 1) Epistemological access leads to the ontologizing of the world in a certain way; 2) Once thinking and questioning stops, then degradation and empowerment take place on two separate levels: a spiritual and material self, in which there is a hierarchy. Thus, the subject is bifurcated. One then interprets the world through a spiritual lens that assumes divine benevolence. Such spiritual reality away the physical pain and suffering. Indeed, only the spiritual is legitimate; 3) Inviolable spiritual community to that functions as the plausibility structure.

530 Larsen, 124.
the false consciousness of freedom or autonomy. Instead, there is a taking responsibility for herself and her choices in her situatedness.

Valeria

The third and final case study that I offered was the story of Valeria. The most contemporary of the three temporally, she is also perhaps the most conventional in terms of her faith expression, at least in terms of what one might find within the African American Christian community. Therefore, she is important, in my estimation, as representative case in this study to examine African American religious experience in terms of the everyday and ordinary.

As previously noted, Valeria’s religious experience involves issues of health, namely hepatitis and chronic back pain. When one looks at Valeria’s accounts, I believe that explanations that one might reach through the theories and methodologies of the everyday are markedly more compelling, coherent, and consistent than the distortion that must take place in an effort to regularize or systemize them in a way amenable to the dominant liberation paradigm.

In Chapter 4, I made reference to the fraught and often contentious history that has existed within the African American community with respect to health care. As I write this chapter, the country is presently engaged in public debate regarding a course of reform of the system. Much of the rhetoric that is being deployed by those in opposition to such reform maintains that health care for all is simply too great a burden for the American society. Others express fear of a system that will bring about a rationing of care, the elimination of choice one currently has in selecting a physician, and an overall
reduction in the quality of care that is available to them.\textsuperscript{531} Ironically, this is often very much of the reality for existing segments of the population who are poor, uninsured, or live in areas and locales which place a great deal of strain on the health care system. Unfortunately, such experiences are not foreign to a significant portion of the African American community. Under-funded hospitals and clinics in the largely African American urban centers such as Harlem and Detroit might mean all day stays in waiting, a shortage of beds once one admitted, and a staff of health care providers stretched to the breaking point. Moreover, given insurance in this country is normally tied to employment; those communities with the higher rates of unemployment and underemployment also have large populations of uninsured and underinsured.\textsuperscript{532}

In the case of Valeria, though we are told that she is employed with sites on retirement, one might assume that she should have adequate health coverage. Yet, she turns to her faith community and her personal spiritual practice for healing and relief. As noted earlier, Greater Faith is a megachurch, with the TV, radio, and internet ministries, proffering what might be best characterized as a “prosperity gospel.” Using the classic categories developed by Baer and Singer, in \textit{African American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation}\textsuperscript{533}, the congregation is in keeping with those deemed as Accommodationist, straddling the interstitial region between Conversionist and Thaumaturgical sects. These traditions emphasize individual salvation, political quiescence, Further, though they may support the acquisition of material, and

\textsuperscript{531} http://www.naacp.org/get-involved/activism/alerts/111thaa-2009-08-11/myths/index.htm
\textsuperscript{532} http://www.naacp.org/get-involved/activism/alerts/111thaa-2009-08-11/myths/index.htm
\textsuperscript{533} Baer and Singer, in \textit{African American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation}. 
social prosperity, the mechanism by which such is achieved is through application of
spiritual power.

With growth in both African American megachurches as well as communities that
promote prosperity teaching, a burgeoning field of recent scholarship has been
undertaken to understand the phenomenon. One such study is that of Milmon E.
Harrison’s Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African
American Religion. In this text, Harrison explores the Word of Faith Movement, also
referred to as the Faith Movement. The core beliefs of this movement are an emphasis in
knowing who they are in Christ; positive confession, i.e., affirming all that God has said
about the faithful in Christ for them; and subsequently to experience prosperity in the
form of divine health and material wealth. Indeed, God wants all people to live a life of
health and wealth.

A particular focus of Harrison is how racial, ethnic, and gender minorities
appropriate and use the Faith Movement teachings to reach their goals. Harrison places
the Faith Movement within the larger tradition of prosperity teaching in African
American religion. He argues that it is a confluence of various streams that have existed
within the African American community for several generations. Like Baer and Singer,
Harrison points to the economic considerations that have been a historical concern of
African American religious communities, across various denominations. As Baer and
Singer note, however, there have been a myriad of ways in which this concern has been

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535 Ibid. 9-11.
manifest, some more particularity and individualism as compared to others that are more
communitarian in nature.\textsuperscript{536}

Harrison’s work is strengthened by the various accounts of members involved in
the movement and how they exercise their faith.\textsuperscript{537} However, Harrison also engages in a
macro level of analysis. He asserts that African American churches are particularly
susceptible to Word of Faith theology because of their history of oppression which
generated an ethic of survival: “To limit ministry to the spiritual realm was a luxury they
could not afford given the legacy of slavery and their post-Emancipation experience of
discrimination.”\textsuperscript{538} Harrison also makes the argument that in the African American
community, the contemporary expressions of Word of Faith ministries associated with
figures such as Creflo A. Dollar and his World Changers International Ministries in
College Park, GA; Fred Price of the Crenshaw Christian Center in South Central Los
Angeles; and Keith Butler of Word of Faith International Christian Ministries in
Southfield, MI; did not emerge in a vacuum. In many respects, according to Harrison,
they have tapped into elements of urban religious movements associated with figures
such as Elder Lightfoot Solomon Michaux, Father Divine, and Daddy Grace. Within the
contemporary ministries can also be seen the influence of New Thought metaphysical
pioneers such as Johnnie Colemon and Rev. Ike.\textsuperscript{539}

\textsuperscript{536} Also see, Omar M. McRoberts, Streets of Glory : Church and Community in a Black Urban
   Neighborhood (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), 138. Of particular relevance are his comments on
   religious particularism and niching.
\textsuperscript{537} Harrison, Righteous Riches : The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion.
   E.g., the experiences of an African American woman named Cassandra (24-28, 52-54); probably bear the
   closest similarity to those of Valeria.
\textsuperscript{538} Ibid. 132.
\textsuperscript{539} Ibid. 134-137.
Similar observations can be found in Shayne Lee’s *T. D. Jakes: America’s New Preacher*. According to Lee, there is something quintessentially American about these megachurches and prosperity leader. While I have a problem with Lee’s designation of Jakes as “postmodern,” (albeit he acknowledges his idiosyncratic use of the term) I do agree with his characterization of Jakes and his peers as innovators within the “new black church.” Lee asserts that the new black church is distinguished by “their ability to combine an otherworldly experience of ecstatic worship and spiritual enlightenment with a this-worldly emphasis on style, image, and economic prosperity.” Continuing, he says,

The genius of the new black church is the flexibility, sophistication, and ingenuity to use twenty-first-century technology to win twenty-first-century souls. What separates the new black church from traditional churches is the savvy and willingness to contextualize Christianity for contemporary needs and culture, while not compromising a vigorous support for biblical authority...leaders of the new black church [have] a keen understanding of postmodern culture and an inexorable drive to produce spiritual commodities for mass consumption in an ever-expanding market.

Later, Lee asserts that such prosperity preachers like Jakes embrace consumer culture and express little concern for the unequal distribution of wealth or challenging the ways our social structure relates to exploitation. This observation is also made in a later article by Lee on Jakes and “prosperity theology” Lee contends that Word-of-faith teaching asserts Christians have the power to control their physical well-being and financial fortunes through their faith. The underlying assumption is that the death and

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541 Ibid, 5.
543 Ibid., 174
resurrection of Jesus Christ provided Christians with the ability to live in total victory, financial prosperity, and perfect health. However, God is constrained by our lack of faith and adherence to the basic biblical principles. Once believers strengthen their faith and live in accordance with biblical mandates, they will be blessed physically and financially.

Lee also associates the phenomenon with the move of many African American’s into middle and upper socio-economic classes in the 1980’s. He asserts that due to the speed with which this happened, as a group, there was an absence of socialization and enculturation associated with the existing African American elites. Thus, “almost every city nationwide has at least one black neo-Pentecostal megachurch where middle class and wealthy African American’s worship, network, and put their skills and talents to use. Prosperity teachings allow them to enjoy their wealth and consumerism as their rightful inheritance as God’s faithful children.

In support of my own thesis of the inadequacy of a hermeneutics of liberation paradigm, understood in terms of macroscopic social, cultural, and economic transformation, Lee documents the criticism such churches have from the liberationist’s tradition, specifically that to the extent that such churches might promote change, it is at the level of the individual, thus “liberation” is couched in terms of individual responsibility rather than calling into questions systems and structures that perpetuate of poverty and oppression. Indeed, Black neo-Pentecostal pastors, celebrity ministers, and heads of megachurches and national ministries are strong advocates of neo-liberal

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545 Ibid, 228.
546 Ibid, 228. Note the characterization of “neo-Pentecostal” is to distinguish this movement from traditional Pentecostal movements which tended to shun the trappings of the world.
547 Ibid, 233.
capitalism and free markets as they sell books, videos, and tapes to increase their wealth. Subsequently, over the last 30 years, traditional African American congregations have lost much in the way of their position and prestige to neo-Pentecostal churches along with "Old Pentecostalism" that harbored anti-secular sentiments. Into the void has emerged a new Pentecostal movement that aggressively embraces technology, secularism, capitalism, and popular culture.\footnote{Ibid, 234-235. Other scholarly works that explore this trend in African American religion include Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, \textit{Holy Mavericks : Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace} (New York: New York University Press, 2009). Here Lee explores the concept of religious economies where churches are firms, pastors are marketers and producers, and congregants are consumers. Stephanie Y. Mitchem, \textit{Name It and Claim It? : Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church} (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2007). In wanting to "paint a portrait of black religious life" (xii) She first identifies what she refers to as a "spirituality of longing" in the African American community, which takes the form of a questing to be accepted over against the experience of oppression. She argues that there is hence a susceptibility to prosperity message. different types of prosperity churches: those that are autochthonous churches, e.g., Daddy Grace and Father Divine; those who model themselves after white prosperity ministries of Hagin and Copeland; and those who have roots in the metaphysical approaches, e.g., Coleman and Ike. She essentially concludes that these institutions have something compelling and appealing that cannot and should not be ignored.}

Finally, I would point to the work of Daphne C. Wiggins and her monograph, \textit{Righteous Content: Black Women's Perspectives of Church and Faith}.\footnote{Daphne C. Wiggins, \textit{Righteous Content : Black Women's Perspectives of Church and Faith} (New York: New York University Press, 2005).} An examination of African America women involved in the Black Church, this work explores black women’s religiosity, which for Wiggins encompasses “an individual’s beliefs and behaviors in relation to/on behalf of the supernatural, as well as the consequences of this aspect upon the individual.”\footnote{Ibid. 3. A comparable work is that of Marla Faye Frederick, \textit{Between Sundays : Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).}

Consisting of in-depth interviews with 38 women in addition to observational data from worship services, Bible studies, and women’s auxiliary meetings in two congregations, Wiggins provides a number of revealing insights and observation that challenge conventional wisdom as well as certain aspects of the dominant macroscopic
liberation paradigm. Of particular import to the thesis of my work is her challenge to claims of docility with respect to African American women and religious institutions. Wiggins calls attention to a persistent question for many outside observers as well as a number of those within institutional black churches, specifically, why women, who are a marked majority in most of such congregations – according to the famous study of Lincoln and Mamiya there are on average 2.5 to 3 women for every man in historically black churches\(^\text{551}\) - that church leadership at the congregational level as well as denominationally, is overwhelmingly male.

Wiggins's emphasis is on the various ways that the church functions in terms of socialization and the supportive community for women. To quote the title of one of her chapters that derives from her interviewee Sister Lori, the church is the “fuel that keeps me going.”\(^\text{552}\) Wiggins notes the work of sociologist as well as womanist theologians, and while noting that the grievances against the black church against women are to be taken seriously, women like Sister Lori and Valeria find hope, inspiration, and healing in the institution. Wiggins, therefore, rejects simplistic characterization of women as docile, as devoid of agency with respect to their religious life and how it functions even within the largely patriarchal power structures of the church. “Women attest to the enduring power of the church to define, foster, and affirm a sense of “somebodiness” among African Americans. Amid social situations that often denigrate and oppress black women – racism, economic inequalities, sexism, pathological interpretations of black motherhood,
Eurocentric standards of beauty, physical violence, cultural stereotypes ranging from Jezebel to Mammy – churches provide alternative constructions of the self.553

Consistent with my characterization and critique of the liberationist paradigm, Wiggins argues that

Women are not taking an active role in instituting structural changes concerning women in their denominations. The conceptual divisions of reality into sacred and secular realms are operative among church women. Reliance upon these dualities informs their evaluation of what change is necessary and their assessment of strategies for implementing change.554

She goes on to say,

[T]he women I studied have not formulated a comprehensive analysis of sexism in the church and were not conversant with the works of womanist and feminist scholars who have offered critiques and alternative visions for the church.555

With respect to the dominant model, with its emphasis on macroscopic temporal liberation, this Valeria’s experience does not address the goals and objectives of a course promoting social/political transformation. While it may be the case that the lack of care available to her may be related to macroscopic issues, the telos of Valeria’s actions are proximate, they are immediate and imminent. Once more, she exhibits traits, practices, and tactics meant to bring about wholeness as a self, as a “subject” or “I.”

In terms of everyday life, in Valeria’s practice, there is the creation of a space within her day as she engages in a regular period of prayer and self-anointing. Within her busy schedule, she focuses on her needs, for her own healing. In this act of taking responsibility for her health, she is engaged in an alternative discourse, at least a discourse that differs from the dominant Western narrative that often involves invasive

553 Ibid. 90.
554 Ibid, 131.
555 Wiggins, Righteous Content : Black Women's Perspectives of Church and Faith., 131
procedures for the curing of ailments. Valeria’s practice is in keeping with folk ways, particularly those associated with women in the African American community.

**Exposition**

Again, it is my contention that the theory and methodologies that I have laid out and associated with the “everyday”, the ordinary, and the quotidian are superior in their explanatory power with respect to African American religious experience than those associated with the dominant liberative paradigm deployed among African American religionists.

In the theories of the everyday, the focus is often on simple practices, on the ways operating or doing things, viewing them not simply as the obscure background of social activity, but rather as taking seriously the subtle and hidden logics associated with how a person or community live their lives, day in and day out. Such practices seldom succumb to analysis predicated on systemization and organization. They cannot be explained through statistical models that might mark trends among large groupings, but cannot give much comprehension with respect to the individual or the few.

In the each of the examples: Howard Thurman, Helga Crane, and Valeria, one sees how everyday acts relate *poiesis* of “self” that I have associated with the quixotic intermittent or fleeting experience of wholeness. Whether it is sitting in one’s grandmother’s lap, seeking the safety and security of one’s bed, or praying and anointing oneself before the start of the day, such acts, such procedures, grant access to the lived experience of persons. In the terminology of de Certeau, they create spaces, breaks, ruptures, and deviations within “the grid of power.” With respect to their application to the field of religious studies, I maintain that theories of the everyday provide access to
what is beneath and behind the conscious thoughts of people to find what is deeper or hidden, in an effort to identify the underpinnings of religion and religious phenomenon. This is different from substantive approaches, the purview of hermeneutics, where it is the assumption that religion is best understood in terms of the conceptual content, or ideas to which persons profess allegiance.

Further, as I mentioned numerous times throughout the course of this dissertation, it is my intent to show the weaknesses and deficiencies of the dominant paradigm, and this has directed my line of argumentation as well as the selection of the accounts of religious experience that I have presented thus far. It is my contention, as I believe this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, that accounts such as those of Thurman, Crane, and Valeria do not readily succumb to the theoretical assumptions and methodological tools associated with what I have described as the dominant paradigm in African American religious studies, namely the hermeneutics of liberation with its emphasis on the macroscopic as opposed to the microscopic analysis offered by theories of the everyday.

There are those, however, who might object to the selection of the case studies chosen for analysis. Thus, to show the power of theories of the everyday, I will look at two slave narratives to which the dominant macroscopic liberative analysis has been applied.

The first is a famous conversion experience of an anonymous slave recorded by Clifton H. Johnson in his anthology *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Ex-Slaves,* "I am Blessed, but You are Damned."

One day while laboring in the fields, behind a plow, this slave heard someone calling his name. Thinking it was his master, he became afraid, but then realized that no one was there. Upon hearing it again and seeing no one present, he began to run and the voice said, “Fear not little one, for
behold I come to bring you a message of truth!” All of a sudden, everything became dark and he fell to the ground. When he looked up again, he saw that he was in a new world. Then a voice said to him, “My little one, I have loved you with everlasting love. You are this day made alive and free. You are chosen vessel unto the Lord. Be upright before me, and I will guide you unto all truth. My grace is sufficient for you. Go, I am with you. Preach the gospel, and I will preach with you. You are henceforth the salt of the earth.”

The man says that he looked at his hands, and they were new, he looked at his feet and they were new. He began to clap and shout. About this time, his master came down the field. The slave was emboldened and answered him when he called. The master asked him very roughly, how he had come to plow up corn, for in the midst of his vision, the horse and plow had run away. The slave said that he had been talking with God Almighty and it was God who had plowed up the corn. He immediately began to preach, and all his master could do was to look on and tremble. After taking his leave, the slave proceeded to go after the horse and plow, but again he fell to the ground. This time, the voice said to him,

“Go in peace, fearing no man, for lo I have cut loose your stammering tongue and unstopped your deaf ears. A witness shalt thou be, and thou shalt speak to multitudes, and they shall hear. My word has gone forth and it is power. Be strong, and lo, I am with you even until the world shall end. Amen.” Since that day, he preached the gospel to all persons.556

It is from this narrative that the constructive black liberation theologian, Dwight N. Hopkins draws the title from one of his earliest works, *Cut Loose My Stammering Tongue*.557 In a subsequent text, *Shoes That Fit our Feet*, Hopkins says that enslaved Africans “yearned for the freedom to name themselves and determine the space around

557 Dwight N. Hopkins, *Cut Loose My Stammering Tongue*.
them. As they press toward this mark, they seek a spirituality of full humanity.” Yet later he states that this synonymous with a militancy leading to a quest for emancipation.

I maintain that such an analysis does not possess the subtlety necessary to apprehend such a religious experience. I would argue that this conversion narrative is fundamentally about an understanding of self and identity, and is best understood via the theories of everyday life. It is in the midst of the mundane that the enslaved African experiences this revelation. As with de Certeau’s mystics, one does see how the technologies of the sacred; e.g., conversion, ecstatic worship, kerygma; oppose the dominant discourse and system of oppression that marginalize, exploit, define, and in some instances destroy black bodies and souls. It is these aspects that Hopkins and other proponents of the dominant paradigm latch on too, but err in their efforts of systemization and routinization, extrapolating it to the macroscopic domain of economic, social, and political liberation.

Perhaps an even more explicit example of this distortion is found in Hopkins book, *Shoes That Fit our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology*. Hopkins asserts that objective of this text is to penetrate the core of poor African Americans’ religious convictions in order to gather up lessons and sources for a constructive black theology today. He goes on to say “to construct a black theology, one has to highlight important trends within the black setting and from these trends, draw out their theological significance for the African American community’s justice concern.” In so doing, Hopkins asserts that African Americans have developed a liberation tradition in which “God ruled with unquestioned omnipotence and realized release for total captivity.”

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559 Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet*, 5.
560 Hopkins *Shoes That Fit Our Feet*, 14.
Thus ultimately and definitively, “Yahweh brings freedom” which is interpreted as the radical overthrow of all that oppresses.”

As sources for his project, Hopkins utilizes narratives, spirituals, and folklore, which he argues, support this liberative point of view. Due to the constraints of time, I will recount (only one example), his analysis of an incident involving the beating of one Aunt Susie Ann. As Hopkins relates the story, the overseer whipped the elderly black woman “till the blood run off her on the ground.” He goes on to say, “Aunt Susie faked unconsciousness, fell to the aggressor’s feet, and after the white overseer had put away his whip, Aunt Susie grabbed his weapon and ‘whips him till he couldn’t stand up.’”

Hopkins then says

[S]ingle acts of resistance were not isolated attempts of black loners who fought politically in an individualistic manner. Neither could one black slave succeed against the monstrosity of the slave institution from a practical standpoint. Nor was the African American definition of humanity limited to an individual’s singular rebellious nature. In fact, the resistance of politics connected individual opposition to communal insurrectionary support...No one person, no matter how self-reliant, could sustain himself or herself in an absolute condition of isolation from the protective eyes and ears of fellow slaves if he or she wished to succeed in political resistance.

I would argue, however that such an assertion, though making a claim to value the practices of the poor and oppressed, robs these individual actions of their intrinsic integrity as an ontogenic-egogenic event.

Moreover, the analysis given involves the insistence on codification, systemization, or themetization on the heterogeneous. Indeed, according to Hopkins’s interpretation, it is to the extent that one’s actions contribute to a comprehensive project
that it is significant. It is my contention that such a hermeneutical norm distorts black experience in general and black religious experience in particular. In its stead, I would suggest a Certeauvian influenced method of analysis. In this story, Aunt Susie feigning a blackout brings a cessation to her punishment. This tactic, gives her the occasion, the space, to act, and in this in a way that might be consistent with a framework of resistance amenable to liberationists. Indeed, in his description of what he calls “The Culture of Resistance,” Hopkins points to various practices such as taking-not-stealing and employing a “false display.” While Hopkins associates them with a larger liberation struggle, in my estimation, they are more consistent with microscopic expressions of power associated with issues of agency, in an effort to create space for expression and creativity, i.e., tactics, as opposed to organized and systemic resistance, i.e., strategies.

While some might argue that the only difference between the position that I have laid out with respect to an appropriation of theories of the everyday, and their application to the study of religious experience and that of the dominant liberationist paradigm is one of scale, I maintain that such a characterization stems from several fundamental misunderstandings with respect to concepts such as power, particularly as it relates understandings of resistance and terms such as docility. As I asserted, throughout this work, I find macroscopic models of power to be inadequate in their association with methodologies ill suited for the study of certain phenomena, i.e., they do not possess the subtlety and flexibility to grasp events on the level of everyday life. Further, and perhaps less clear, I am not an advocate of simply any and all models that profess to bring a micro-analytical approach to the study of power. A case in point with respect to the latter
is the understanding of power articulated by Michel Foucault in his earlier works, particularly as expressed in the oft cited \textit{Discipline and Punish}.

Thirdly, I and to a certain extent, perhaps the most significant conclusion that I draw from an application of theories and methodologies of everyday life, is that any discourse of religion as liberative, oppositional, or resistive, with respect to practice, must be circumscribed. While Lefebvre sees the potential for social transformation on the level of everyday, such potentiality exists dialectically with actuality. In the case of de Certeau, opposition and resistance as it relates to practices occupies a domain between the Scylla of modernist assertions of agency and the Charybdis of Foucauldian docility. Inspired by this tradition as well as my training in physics, I would describe religious experience in terms of practices that may circumvent, evade, or opposes oppressive dimensions of power indicative of \textit{stochasticity}, understood as a lack of any predictable or definitive outcome. A stochastic process is one in which a system's subsequent state is determined both by the process's predictable actions and by a random element.\textsuperscript{564}

All forms of power are not the same. All forms of resistance are not the same. I believe that it is an error to assume when liberationists speak of resistance, that it is the same as that of someone theorists like de Certeau. This stems again from the type of power with which he is concerned verses the type of power which concerns liberationist. It is not simply one of scale, which is what I was trying to get at with respect to some of my physics analogies. When I refer to paradigm shifts in an area such as physics with

\textsuperscript{564} An example of a stochastic process in the natural world is pressure in a gas as modeled by the Wiener process. Even though (classically speaking) each molecule is moving in a deterministic path, the motion of a collection of them is computationally and practically unpredictable. A large enough set of molecules will exhibit stochastic characteristics, such as filling the container, exerting equal pressure, diffusing along concentration gradients, etc. These are emergent properties of the systems.
respect to the understanding of quantum mechanics and classical mechanics, it is not just a matter of scale. On the classical scale, one may get answers for macroscopic phenomena that are correct, but it is because the errors in the fundamental assumptions about the laws/theories of physics that are in error (matter and energy are distinct and discrete, temporality and spatiality are independent, etc) result in insignificant perturbation. On the microscopic scale, however, the classical model leads to gross inaccuracies (matter and energy are phases; temporality can be treated as a coordinate along with spatial geometries). Quantum mechanics, however, works regardless of the scale. It is interesting to note that quantum mechanics, as statistical and probabilistic, is also stochastic. The perturbations (randomness), however, which they introduce to the phenomena on the macroscopic scale, however, are able to be ignored. Now, this analogy is not a perfect one with respect to social/technical power and how it works with respect to human beings individually and collective.

Perhaps one of the most important differences between me and proponents of liberation is that at best I wish to be agnostic with respect to whether the type of social transformation which they espouse is possible. While I do affirm the active presence of human agency, albeit greatly circumscribed, the likelihood of it potentiating the kind of large scale social transformation that is the telos of liberationists, remains highly dubious. More likely, African American agency and subjectivity function as a bulwark against the nihilist threat, the loss of hope, the loss of a sense of identity and meaning against overwhelming and crushing odds. These earlier “stalkers after meaning” (to employ a phrase borrowed from the late Dr. James Melvin Washington), found this hope and sense of identity through their religious experiences. I believe that such an understanding of lies
at the heart of what Howard Thurman says, that “life is its own restraint.” According to Thurman, life abounds, persists, in all variety of resources and resourcefulness.\textsuperscript{565} In terms of a theoretical reflection, there is also coherence with Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben in his book \textit{Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life}.\textsuperscript{566} Agamben holds that life exists in two capacities: one is natural biological life, life as a property of organisms (Greek: \textit{zoe}) and the other is political life, as an “object of a technique” in a Foucauldian sense, a way of living, life tinted with custom (Greek: \textit{bios}). This \textit{zoe} is related by Agamben himself to Hannah Arendt’s description of the refugee’s “naked life” in \textit{The Origins of Totalitarianism}.\textsuperscript{567} According to Agamben, the law, the order of things, the constituted state of affairs associated with modernity mirrors that of the concentration camp where one has bare life, but is legally dead. Thus, “fundamental categorical pair of Western politics is not that of friend/enemy but that of bare life/political existence, \textit{zoe/bios}, exclusion/inclusion”.\textsuperscript{568}

Agamben goes on; however, to note certain paradoxes with regard to power. With respect to the nature of sovereignty, it exists be both inside and outside of the juridical order. As such, the sovereign exists in a state of exception with respect to the rules to which he/she is guarantor. Moreover, the sovereign has the power to exercise the exception as a ban that can be inflicted on his/her subjects. The incarnation of this subject is the \textit{homo sacer}. Such persons have been relegated by the sovereign to be outside of the law, they are people who cannot be sacrificed (i.e., they can’t have the privilege of being

\textsuperscript{565} Howard Thurman, \textit{Meditations of the Heart} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999). 73. In \textit{---------}, \textit{The Inward Journey}, 1st ed. (New York: Harper, 1961). 39, Thurman says, “To keep alive an original sense of aliveness is to know that life is its own restraint and a man is able to stand anything that life can do to him. \\
\textsuperscript{568} Agamben, \textit{Homo Sacer}. 8.
sacrificed to something greater), but who can be killed.⁵⁶⁹ As "bare life", the *homo sacer* finds himself submitted to the sovereign's state of exception, and, though he has biological life, it has no political significance. Homo Sacer and the Sovereign are juxtaposed as representing two sides of the same object: "At the two extreme limits of the order, the sovereign and *homo sacer* present two symmetrical figures that have the same structure and are correlative: the sovereign is the one with respect to whom all men are potentially *hominess sacri*, and *homo sacer* is the one with respect to whom all men act as sovereigns."⁵⁷⁰ Yet, while Agamben notes that in the contemporary context, the entire concept of life has been called into question, there is some sense, at least in my estimation, that bare life persists, that as he says in his earlier work, *The Coming Community*⁵⁷¹

If human were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible... This does not mean, however, that humans are not, and do not have to be, something, that they are simply consigned to nothingness and therefore can freely decide whether to be or not to be, to adopt or not to adopt this or that destiny (nihilism and decisionism coincide at this point). There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this is not an essence nor properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one's own existence as possibility or potentiality*...

As I asserted, throughout this work, I find macroscopic models of power to be inadequate in their association with methodologies ill suited for the study of certain phenomena, i.e., they do not possess the subtlety and flexibility to grasp events on the level of everyday life. Further, and perhaps less clear, I am not an advocate of simply any and all models that profess to bring a micro-analytical approach to the study of power. A case in point with respect to the latter is the understanding of power articulated by Michel

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⁵⁶⁹ Ibid. 71.
⁵⁷⁰ Ibid. 84.
⁵⁷¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community, Theory out of Bounds; V. 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Section 11 - Ethics
Foucault in his earlier works, particularly as expressed in the oft cited *Discipline and Punish*.

In his seminal work, *After Virtue*\(^{572}\), Alasdair Chalmers MacIntyre offers his famous critique of relativism. Extrapolating from the discourse between philosophers of science, Imre Lakatos and Thomas Kuhn, MacIntyre asserts that an explanation that can explain why and when another explanation works well in certain situations, when the converse is not true; the former is better than the latter. The inferior conceptual framework is the one that cannot explain the other. Even more than that, the superior conceptual framework can explain why the inferior fails to explain the things that it cannot explain.

Such is the case with respect to theories and methodologies of the everyday in relation to the dominant paradigm with respect to their explanatory power regarding African American religious experience. To the extent that they seem to provide an explanation of religious experience, it is to the extent that everyday practices function oppositionally. Unfortunately, the dominant paradigm fails, however, on numerous counts. Most notably, it fails to account for African American religious experiences such as those represented in the three case studies presented in the last two chapters. At its worst, the dominant paradigm, does not simply fail to account for certain religious experiences, in its deployment, it deigns to deem them as invalid, inauthentic, and pathological. It does this at the same time that it claims to take seriously the lived experience of everyday “black folk.”

\(^{572}\) Alasdair Chalmers MacIntyre, *After Virtue*. 
For some neigh forty years, the dominant paradigm has exerted considerable influence on those who wish to study African American religion and religious experience. In presenting an alternative way of approaching similar subject matter, I am suggesting that it is time for a change in paradigm.
Chapter 6 – Conclusion: A New Paradigm

I shall begin with a recapitulation of what I have presented thus far before offering a final assessment of my investigations. Firstly, in Chapter 1, “An Overview of Religious Experience,” I provide critical reflection on the manner in which religious studies has explored the nature and meaning of religious experience to date, with emphasis on the particularly influential contributions of Schleiermacher, Otto, James, Eliade. I subsequently offer an informed critique of this tradition, one particularly indebted to Wayne Proudfoot. I end the chapter by offering a definition of religious experience to function as a heuristic, deployed after the fashion of Aristotelian or Heideggerian formal indication in order to provide a context for inquiry.

In Chapter 2, “Examples of African American Religious Experience,” I offer in the tradition of Du Bois, Fanon, and Gordon culturally informed phenomenological descriptions of religious experiences associated with the lives of three African Americans. I maintain that this approach is exceptional for the presentation of religious events and/or experiences in that phenomenological accounts emphasis engaging the world as it reveals itself, in its givenness. The objective is a fuller, more complex description of the everyday, and subsequently, a better picture of how religious experience shapes, alters, modifies, and influences the lives of African Americans.

In Chapter 3, “Current Approaches to the Study of African American Religious Experience and their Shortcomings,” I provide critical reflection on the manner in which numerous scholars of African American religion have explored African American religious experience. This review places particular emphasis on the characterizations of
African American religious experience as given within the theological, ethical, and hermeneutical traditions.

In Chapter 4, "Preamble to an ‘Alternate Approach’ to the Study of African American Religious Experience," I present theoretical and methodological approaches associated with the pursuit of "everyday life", "the quotidian," and "the ordinary". It is my contention that such conceptual frames of reference – theories – as well as the accompanying apparatus of investigation – methods or methodologies – are markedly superior to the dominant analytic or logic among African American religionists; i.e., "the hermeneutic of liberation," where liberation is understood primarily as macroscopic and substance. Informed by intellectuals such as Heidegger, Adorno, Père, Lefebvre, and de Certeau, I maintain that a concentration on everydayness⁵⁷³; e.g., coping practices, survival techniques, habits, and tactics, is indispensable for any sincere comprehension of the lived religious experience of "black folk".

In Chapter 5, I make evident the advantage of an analysis of African American religious experience in terms of "everydayness" as opposed to the macroscopic liberative hermeneutical norm. The data used for comparative purposes consists of the phenomenological sketches presented in Chapter 2.

There is much to my mind to commend in the reading of African American religion and religious experience through the lens of the "theories of everyday life." In a conceptual framework that embraces everydayness, there is necessarily an openness and

⁵⁷³ One of the challenges in deploying such theories has to do with how encompassing is the concept of everydayness. It is certainly the case that the theorists in question do not have in mind the social lives of African Americans. Their referents or data are drawn in most instances from twentieth century Europeans. Part of the goal of this project, therefore, is to show that these theories do indeed address the issues of African Americans and are not simply other broad categories that suffer from the same or similar defects as what I have called the dominant interpretive model in African American religion.
appreciation for ambiguity, alterity, and the heteronomous. There is a rejection of
epistemological foundationalism, as well as the rejection of universal rationality. Instead,
the reasonable and the rational are contingent upon the prevailing narratives, forms of
life, and ontic regions of a particular assemblage, society, or culture.

Concomitantly, theories of everydayness are equitable, thus uniquely attuned to
diversity. I contend that such attributes are indispensable in an analysis of African
American religious expression and experience, in its givenness. Unfortunately, with
respect to the African American community, acknowledgement of extant diversity and
plurality is often complicated and contentious. This phenomenon has been noted by
sociologists such as Orlando Patterson\(^\text{574}\) or ethicists such as Peter L. Paris\(^\text{575}\) where there
is a social push toward harmony, coherence, and conformity. Thus, practices or beliefs
deemed aberrant may well be summarily dismissed or become the recipient of derision.
Yet, there exists a myriad of expressions, both those that might seem passive or inward
focused as well as those that are active or demonstrative. In terms my appropriation of the
lens of everydayness, however, “religious quietism” and “religious militancy” are little
more than modalities on a continuum of human expressions, actions, and practices in the
pursuit of wholeness, as opposed to being radically disparate. One expression is not
inherently more valid or authentic than another from a logic or analytics of everyday life.
It is here that the postmodern influence in my argumentation is perhaps clearest. There is

\(^{574}\) See for example, Orlando Patterson, *Ethnic Chauvinism: The Reactionary Impulse* (New York: Stein
and Day, 1977). In Chapter 2, he references the anthropological distinction between the rebel and the
revolutionary in society. In many respect, the revolutionary may well be a conformist

\(^{575}\) Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse*
(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Throughout the work, Paris speaks to the importance of community
for African people. “The corporate community always assumes priority over individual members. Thus,
under certain conditions the person may be sacrificed for the well-being of the corporate body.” (111)
a rejection of a comprehensive scheme.\textsuperscript{576} There is no claim “Truth”, but rather truths. No “History,” but rather histories. Though often the subject of critique in this thesis, I am in agreement with Foucault’s assertions that discourse is inextricably linked with power, thus universal truth claims are simply masks for ideology and the will to power, or in his invocation of Nietzsche, “Truth is undoubtedly the sort of error that cannot be refuted because it was hardened into an unalterable form in the long baking process of history.”\textsuperscript{577}

It is my contention, however, that religious experience in general, and African American experience in particular, can be more faithfully analyzed and explained, with respect to matters of their complexity, through approaches associated with the theories and methodologies of the quotidian over against the liberative hermeneutical paradigm that not so infrequently imposes homogeneity and normativity on human activity.\textsuperscript{578} Moreover, I contend that when applied to certain data or artifacts; e.g., narratives and biographies, sociological data, anthropological/archeological spaces and historical materials; the theories and methods of the everyday will provide insights into African American religion and religious experience, some of which have been ignored, dismissed, or distorted due to its inability to conform to assumptions, expressed or otherwise. Indeed, an interpretation or explanation of African American religious experience in terms of everyday life and practice may serve as a heuristic by which one examine the challenge of Africana peoples in terms of egogenesis and sociogenesis in relation to racialization as well as other phenomenon.

\textsuperscript{577} Foucault, \textit{Language, Counter-Memory, Practice : Selected Essays and Interviews}, 144.
\textsuperscript{578} This is particularly the case to the extent that the normative paradigm embraces the language of the ethical.
It is important to note that in asserting the primacy of theories and methodologies of the everyday, I do not deem the scholarship of those who identify with the "hermeneutic of liberation" illegitimate. Both trajectories offer important critiques of modernity. Both profess suspicions of various metanarratives and social foundations. Nevertheless, the "hermeneutic of liberation" tradition as it has been implemented has serious flaws. Firstly, in its privileging of a perspective emphasizing gross structures and systems of oppression associated particularly with white supremacy, and to a lesser extent, to prevailing discourses such as monopoly capitalism, sexism, heterosexism, and imperialism it has as interpreted African American religion and religious experience as embodying strategies that ostensibly will result in the realization of radical freedom. As such it is also bound to totalizing, overdetermined interpretations of history as well as the triumphalism indicative of "modernities" whether they are secular or religious (qua Christianity). Yet, as I have argued, such a posture is associated with a mischaracterization or overstatement of human agency. Moreover, as traditionally rendered among African American theologians, there is an assumed Christian normativity to African American religious experience.

With a turn to theories and methodologies such as those I espouse, such problems and conclusions can be averted. A focus on "everydayness" is attentive to the microphysics of power, the heterogenous, to tactics the common person, the folk Further, there is a rejection of normative claims and the privileging of certain religious experiences and expressions over others, at least at the level of the explanatory/interpretative. Rather, in terms of the telos of African American religious
experiences, I proffer a formal indication of a perpetual quest for wholeness, understood as assertions of agency, creativity, and human flourishing.

As mentioned in the last chapter, the extent that one might characterize such tactics as oppositional practices, which possess a potential to resistance, circumvent, evade, or opposes oppressive dimensions of power, there is some mutuality with the schematizations of African American religious experience in terms of liberation. Yet, it is my contention that the distinctions that do exist are significant and substantive. With respect to the dominant paradigm, the African Americans subjectivity and agency is distorted, exaggerated for some, and muted if not effaced for others.\(^{579}\) Ironically, this is

\(^{579}\) Baer and Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation*. The focus of their study is on the role of religion as an adaptive response to the changing economic forces and institutional arrangements that have confronted African Americans. It is their assertion, that while some religious leaders have protested against racial oppression and challenged socioeconomic exclusion, most African American religious groups have, often inadvertently, buttressed the hegemony of the capitalist system. In other words, they have accepted the standards presented by the status quo.

The study moves forward to examine the various forms of protest and accommodation among four broad types of African American religious groups. Firstly, mainstream churches such as such as Baptist and Methodist denominations (African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Christian Methodists Episcopal, and the various National Baptists and the Progressive National Baptist Conventions) promote political reformism and African American social and economic integration. For the most part, such denominations are for instrumental, material goals and social status with acceptance of beliefs, attitudes, and values of the larger society. According to Baer and Singer, such bodies fail to link racism with capitalism and therefore often reinforce, rather than challenge, the oppression of African Americans.

Secondly, Conversionist sects such as Holiness/Pentecostal groups like the Church of God in Christ emphasize individual salvation, “otherworldliness,” and political quiescence. According to Baer and Singer, Holiness and Pentecostal movements combine expressive social action with negative attitudinal orientation. Thus, they fail in terms of offering an effective critique of racism and capitalism. The authors judge them as primarily apolitical; their focus being on individual sanctification, strict moral code, concentrating on heavenly rewards.

Thirdly, Messianic-Nationalist sects associated with various expressions of Islam, Judaism, and “liberation theology”; e.g., Nation of Islam, Black Hebrew Israelites, and the Pan-African Orthodox Church of Christ link religious belief with the struggle for African American cultural and institutional autonomy. Thus, they support instrumental, material goals and social status, but reject the beliefs, attitudes, and values of the larger society. According to Baer and Singer, such groups are generally founded by charismatic individuals perceived as God, messiah, or prophet. While they challenge racism and offer a sharp critique of society, their popularity ebbs and flows in relation to economic stability of African Americans. During times of economic stability or prosperity, they lose members, and often soften their protest, thus undermining their counter-hegemonic potential.

Fourthly, Thaumaturgical sects such as Spiritualists; promote the attainment of socially desired ends – for example, prosperity, prestige, health – through the acquisition of esoteric knowledge or participation in magico-religious rituals designed to provide spiritual power. They are characterized by expressive social action strategies combined with a positive attitudinal orientation. They tend to eschew
antithetical to the articulated objectives of scholars engaged in such research, who wish to
give voices to the voiceless.

Also, as I allude to in Chapter 2, I have serious reservations about the
hermeneutical traditions attempts to define the methods and processes whereby what is
meaningful is made meaningful (whether one is referring to a text or one’s experience of
the world. I have a greater affinity for the critical tradition, which seeks to develop
critiques of the methods, theories, and politics of appropriators of the “meaningful.” Once
more invoking the posture of a postmodernist, I find that the assumed holism (the
guarantee that meaning can be discovered) that resides at the heart of the hermeneutical
tradition presumptive. Conversely, the presupposition of the critical tradition is that
meaning is always historically embedded, is always caught up with the exercise of
individual and institutional “will to power”. The presupposition of hermeneutics is that
universal meaning exists independent of, but is accessible through, all local expressions
of meaning. The presupposition of the critical tradition is that meaning is constructed –
that it is dependent on the systematic framework we use to structure our experience (ala
Kant), and by our language (ala Derrida). Contrary to being discovered, “meaning is
created and invested with value within certain cultural matrices,” which the critical
tradition wishes to interrogate.580

In addition, one of the attributes of the “hermeneutics of liberation” is the
conflation of theology and ethics, often alluded to as the “theoethical.” I maintain that in

protest in favor of accommodation. They view positive thinking, incantations, voodoo, and occultism to
alter unfavorable circumstances. Like Conversionist, their focus tends to be individualistic. For Baer and
Singer, as well as those committed to the liberationist paradigm there is marked preference for the
Messianic-Nationalist goals and objectives, particularly over against those of the Conversionist and
Thaumaturgical sects.

Xv.
terms of analyzing, describing, or explaining African American religious experience. Ethics as *ethos* when referenced in terms of religion is dealing with what motivates people to act in certain ways, with an intentionality of "the ought" over against "the is."

Theology, generously construed, involves an examination and exploration of a worldview as represented by various symbols, metaphors, and categories. While possessing different disciplinary commitments, in general, I find ethics – as a normative approach – particularly ill suited as a tool of discernment with respect to nature, character, or substance of religious experience, African American, or other.

In a similar vein, the work of Robert Orsi is of particular relevance here. Orsi is noted for his attempts to move the discourse about religion beyond characterizations of good or bad for the people who practice it. In *Between Heaven and Earth*, Orsi makes the case that positive or negative assessments of religious practice are beside the point. For him religion, religious practices, and religious experience are primarily about relationships. In *Between Heaven and Earth*, Orsi begins with an exploration of the relationships between humans and holy figures and the consequences of said "for the everyday lives of men, women, and children." Orsi notes, however, that for most modern people and scholars in the West, religion is understood as a medium or method for explaining, interpreting, or representing "reality." When religion and religious practices are seen as networks of relations "between heaven and earth," between the diversity that constitutes humanity and the many and varied sacred figures, one sees that they mirror the complexities of relationships between human beings with "all the hopes,

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582 Ibid. 2.
evasions, love, fear, denial, projections, misunderstandings, and so on." Orsi later states,

Before introducing or reintroducing moral questions into our approach to other people’s religious worlds, before we draw the lines between the pathological and the healthy, the bad and the good, we need to excavate our hidden moral and political history. Otherwise, the distinctions that we make will merely be the reiteration of unacknowledged assumptions, prejudices, and implications in power.

Invoking the work of David L. Haberman with respect to the problematic of moral judgment in a world where human beings experience a multiplicity of realities and therefrom draw a multiplicity of meanings. Because each of our views are relative; i.e., dependent on our particular world, location, social situation, there is no objective or normative frame of reference.

However, I am not alone in my criticisms of the liberation tradition. For example Victor Anderson asserts that categories such as “ontological blackness” and its concomitant heroic racial aesthetic tend to “distort far too much of the conditions of African American life and experience in the United States.” While an advocate for individuality and diversity, achieved through displacing, decentering, and transcending the determinative transactions and practices of African American lived experience, Anderson does not offer much in the way of promising theoretical or methodological trajectories that might facilitate the more inclusive rendering that he advocates.

The sentiment that I have expressed with respect to the dominance of the hermeneutics of liberation among African American religionists is not dissimilar to that

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583 Ibid. 2.
584 Ibid. 180.
expressed by Theophus Smith in his influential work *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*. In the chapter entitled “Theological Perspectives”, he speaks of the need for redirecting the trajectory of contemporary black theology and “religious philosophies.” Smith goes on to say that his own scholarship, as constituted by the work presented in the very same monograph, while dependent or even indebted to the larger tradition, is nevertheless, also critical of it, particularly with respect to the concept of liberation.

Indeed, Smith states

I concur with liberation theologians, on the one hand, in the recognition of theology as a mode of reflection that is inevitably related to issues of power and empowerment. In this connection I have been greatly instructed, and spiritually disencumbered by liberation theology’s critique of Western theologies and of their systemic complicity in racism.

Smith goes on to declare that he owes much of his own sense of vocation and mission in the field of religious studies to black theology, and yet

I find that, in the turn from critique to construction, black liberation theology has become enamored of, and stereotyped by its own positivism or “ideology” of intraethnic religious empowerment. In the interest of such empowerment, I judge, liberation theology as a discipline systematically abstracts and privileges selected contexts of liberation and oppression over against other forms of experience... Earlier critics too have charge that black liberation theology so privileges the experiences of oppression (its import and significance) that it tends to displace or supplant people’s multifaceted religious experience with its one-dimensional interest...

Black religious experience, however, is not reducible to the experience of suffering and oppression, nor to the quest to overcome suffering and oppression.

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588 Ibid. 177.
589 Ibid, 178.
Finally, I would call attention to the work of Eddie Glaude’s *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*. Glaude applies his interpretation of Deweyan pragmatism to the politics of African America. Consistent with Dewey’s concern for history, Glaude moves the reader from the period of the Civil Rights movement to the contemporary context to which he attaches the nomenclature “post soul.”

Glaude believes that a critical reading of African American experience – “the shade of blue” – referred to in the title – is critical for America in general and African America in particular, as we reflect on the type of society we aspire to create. According to Glaude, “Our primary responsibility is to act intelligently in order to ensure, as much as humanly possible, that this future is better than our present.”

As a Deweyan Glaude embraces reflective practice in the light of personal experience, asking the question “how does our doing impact our action and experience in the present.” Glaude’s goal is to help us live a “history whose aim is life” that may help us accept an often cruel and repressive past. It is not surprising in this sense that one of phenomena that Glaude engages is memory. Glaude talks about the significance of America’s loss of memory, referring to its affinity for engaging in nostalgia which he characterizes as the identical twin of progress.

With respect to religion, Glaude asserts that it does not function simply as an opiate or simply as a revolutionary force. It has a more complex life as a tool that enables

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591 The term “post-soul” is a neologism that seems to have been first coined by Nelson George.
592 Glaude, 25.
593 Glaude, 82.
594 As I will show in the next chapter where I introduce the notion of African American religious experience as an oppositional practice, memory is very important within the context of the various discourses deployment of power. This is noted in the work of Foucault and de Certeau. Memory is not static. Moreover, memory is not simply fragile. It is inextricably linked with issues of agency and identity.
595 The late Christopher Lasch in *True and Only Heaven* asserts that nostalgia is in fact the abdication of memory.
the kind of everyday agency that may or may not be liberative but is certainly directed
toward survival. It is his assessment that as a discourse, Black theology simplifies,
essentializes, and reifies black religious experiences. While Glaude recognizes the vital
importance of Black theological scholarship, he asserts that the invocation of history is
less than critical. What he proposes is that Black theologians, et al should read back into
history the “contingency and instability.”

Thus, along with small yet burgeoning community of dissenters, I offer an
approach informed by theories of “everyday life” as one that might open new horizons
within African American religious scholarship. It is my hope that scholars of African
American religion will avail themselves of such resources that have the potential for
greater precision and rigor in research.

Where do we go from here?

In addition to the concepts of the everyday, my research has opened avenues to
further work with cultural phenomenology, particularly as it relates to religion and
religious experience in general, and African American/Africana religion and religious
experience in particular. As noted in Chapter 4, some work along this line has been

carried out by James Bryant and Paget Henry. In 2006, their paper on Howard Thurman

596 There are clearly affinities in my work and what Glaude touches on with respect to religion. There are
however, several differences:
• Identity is not as much of an issue for me as it is for Glaude. This again is central to Glaude and it
  is why there is this allegiance to the American project and the exploration of the theme of
  American belonging that he identifies and pursues in the literature of Baldwin and Morrison.
  Again, identity is not a concern for me explicitly. Religious experience is integral to notions of
  identity, but it is not the same thing.
• As one would expect, there is a moral component to his analysis, in keeping with the Deweyan
  and Jamesian commitment to amelioration.
• The emphasis of Glaude’s discourse is the creation of an effective politics. I am not interested in
  this.
presented to the Phenomenology Roundtable at Temple University might be seen as a nascent contribution among Africana phenomenologists attempting to take seriously African American religious thought. In their work, unlike Henry’s cursory engagement with religion in *Caliban’s Reason*, the theo-poetic language of Thurman is framed in a way as to provide phenomenological insight into African American consciousness in a racialized society. The paper focused on only one of Thurman’s works, *The Luminous Darkness*, but there are surely other materials to be mined within his oeuvre. Moreover, there are surely resources of other theologians, divines, and religious persons within the African American community, past and present, waiting to be plumbed. Further, it might be fruitful to bring the work of such individuals in dialogue in a comparative fashion with contemporary philosophers and phenomenologists who are exploring questions of a religious nature. For example, I am particularly intrigued about bringing together the ideas of Thurman with the likes of the French phenomenologist and theologian Jean Luc Marion.

Conversely, as it relates to theory and method in the study of African American religion and religious experience, a closer look is owed to the African American legacy in philosophy of religion. An analysis of the works of individuals from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century such as Patrick Francis Healy, Alexander Crummell, Lewis B. Moore, Gilbert Haven Jones, Alain Locke\(^\text{597}\), and Cornelius Lacy Golightly, to more contemporary scholars such as J. Deotis Roberts and William R. Jones is certainly past due. Further, as noted in Chapter 2, literature opens up a world suitable for phenomenological analysis as well as exploration in terms of everydayness. In the

\(^{597}\) *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy* by Christopher Buck is but a superficial analysis. A much more scholarly study by someone familiar with philosophical and religious discourse is needed.
context of the dissertation, I chose the novel *Quicksand* by the Harlem Renaissance author, Nella Larsen. It is my contention, however, that much can be gained in deploying the theories and methodologies evinced in my analysis of *Quicksand* to any number of African American literary sources.

One work containing what I find to be intriguing and compelling religious themes and expressions that I considered for the dissertation is Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. In particular, I was drawn to a character that the reader encounters, but never actually ‘meets,’ in the novel - Rinehart. Rinehart is the consummate changeling, a master of disguise, the quintessential trickster, who uses his invisibility to great advantage. In de Certeauvian language, Rinehart is a master of tactics and space. He assumes and discards identities as a preacher, a lover, a number runner, a police informant, and a pimp. Moreover, compared to all the other characters in the novel, particularly the protagonist, whose perception of the world is under constant assault, Rinehart seems virtually unscathed and unaffected by his environment, adapting to what is given. He has few if any qualms about deploying procedures and ruses to fashion a life of his own, that is an expression of his will and creativity.

Several literary commentators on the character of Rinehart are particularly interested in the significance of the name. Is it Ellison’s intention to convey that as “rind and heart,” Rinehart is a whole being, a being that does not need others to validate his existence? When confronted by the phenomenon of racialization, does he become undone, does he face the terror of non-being. Perhaps, as a changeling, as one who does not adhere to ontological essentialism, non-being does not fill him the anxiety indicative of most others.
When the narrator of the novel accidentally adopts the attire of Rinehart, it is a moment of revelation for him. When people look at him, he is aware that they see what they want to see, what they expect to see. Who he “is” is not important to them. Indeed, at one point he asks himself the question, “Do they see a Negro or a spook?” Is he a self? Is he a projection of their repressed fears, or is he some other kind of phantom? 598

Within the African American tradition, there are numerous myths and folk tales about trickster characters. These characters are simultaneously revered as well as subject to suspicion. Yet, they are frequently seen as possessing some unique wisdom, which they might share with others. One such character in African American folktales is the signifying monkey, which can be traced back to Yoruba mythology and is associated with the orisha Eshu (other names include Exu, Esu Eleggua, Esu Elegbara, Eshu Elegbara, Elegba, Legba, and Eleda). Here the trickster is also the mediator between humans and the divine, between the mundane and the sacred. 599

A study of the trickster or the changeling in African American literature might be particularly fruitful in attempts to grasp African American understandings and construal of the self as well as the relationship between the sacred and the mundane. 600 There is

598 I am greatly intrigued by the phenomenology and the language here, particularly the term spook. Spook has long been a derogatory term for African Americans. It is used to refer to spies - hence the interesting double entendre associated with the novel The Spook Who Sat By the Door, about an African American nationalist/freedom fighter infiltrating the CIA.

Moreover, spooks, ghosts, spirits, haunts, etc. exists between worlds. One is never really sure whether they are here or not, at least not fully.

599 Once more, the work of Turner is of relevance. The trickster is a liminal entity and personifies attributes associated with liminality and rituals such as rites of passage, “invisibility, ambiguity, bisexuality.” Eshu is a “deity” associated with transitions and intersections, most notably, the crossroad.

600 There are other tricksters in both folk literature, e.g., Brer Rabbit, as well as contemporary literature such as Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon and the character of Pilate Dead. Moreover, though it is not the focus of this dissertation, the concept of a kind of changeling has some interesting implications for ethics as seen in the work of Edith Wyschogrod, Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy, Religion and Postmodernism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990). In a move away from ethical theories, in a critique reminiscent to my early comments about theorizism, Wyschogrod indicates that the ethical is more adequately rendered in terms of imperative rather than indicative speech. Thus, from ethics.
also a great deal more that might be done with respect to the phenomenology of sight, the visible, and the invisible, which is also a reoccurring theme in African American writing.

A new paradigm?

As one whose first love was science, throughout this dissertation, there have been allusions to disciplines such as physics, particularly with respect to the relationship between classical mechanics and dynamics associated with the likes of Newton and Hamilton, and quantum and relativistic theory, associated with names such as Planck, Heisenberg, and Einstein. In his now classic work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Thomas Kuhn presents the model of the paradigm shift to express the transition from one conceptual framework to another as it relates to theories in science. In this work, Kuhn calls into question science as a rational enterprise, at a time when it was held as the archetypical rational field. Prior to Kuhn, the most respected model for the scientific method was that of Karl Popper, which viewed science as an inductive process that proceeded on the basis of categorical falsifiability.  

Kuhn notes, however, that there are as rational schematizations, she directs one to an examination of the lives of saints. Saintly lives are compelling; there is an imperative quality about them (243).

According to Wyschogrod, radical alterity is constitutive of moral discourse and practice, and it is just this sense of radical alterity that informs saintly practice (71). The notion of radical alterity presupposes the repudiation of agency and subjectivity, on the grounds that agency 'as such is a property of the self in its efforts to maintain its own interests' (63) For the saint, however, the self disappears in the face of the needs of the Other. As such, the saint is the consummate deconstructor of the self. The saint surrenders to the vortex of the Other, displacing self with the insatiable lack of the Other. (3) The saint, therefore, is a metaphor, the quintessential changeling. Subjectivity withers away before alterity. In Wyschogrod’s view, a moral theory that promotes the conditions of agency for others betrays alterity in that it presupposes the other as a ‘second self’ to whom the conditions of agency are to be extended. See also Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern a/Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). For Taylor, subjectivity disappears, giving way to the emergence of the ‘trace.’ I realize, however, that treatment of alterity in Wyschogrod and Taylor, along with their refusal to refigure subjectivity in terms of a more democratic and empathetic mode of relationship between mutually recognized and recognizing subjects, poses some significant if not disquieting implications persons from historically oppressed and marginalized groups and communities. Yet, this should not negate inquiry in this area.  

frequent discontinuities and irregularities in the development of science. Indeed, that
there are certain research programs, e.g. Newtonian physics, that begin to degenerate
because they are no longer able to answer the problems they generate, e.g., how objects
operate on the microscopic level or at relativistic speeds. For a time, scientists attempt to
account for the anomalies within the framework they are using at a particular time.
However, as time goes on, they begin to collect more and more anomalies that do not fit
within the paradigm. Finally, the scientists undergo what Kuhn refers to as a
"conversion" to a new paradigm. The old one is discarded; a new one is taken on.

While there have been criticism of Kuhn's thesis, particularly with respect to the
incommensurability between paradigms, his epistemological model has had a profound
impact on multiple disciplines and fields, including areas of the humanities. It is my
contention that the prevailing paradigm used in the understanding of African American
religious experience, the "hermeneutics of liberation" is not able to address the numerous
problems that have amassed over the last four decades, and thus, African American
religionist are in need of "conversion." This conversion would be evinced in receptivity
to new conceptual frameworks, such as I have suggested in this exposition.

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602 Such critiques were offered soon after Kuhn presented his thesis on paradigms by scholars such as the
Hungarian, Imre Lakatos, who was so influential in the scholarship of Alasdair MacIntyre whom I cited in
chapter 5.
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