

FROM THE SUFFERING (BLACK) JESUS TO THE SACRILEGIOUS YEEZUS:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF CHRIST IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ART AND RELIGIOUS  
THOUGHT

A Thesis  
by  
KEVIN WOOD PYON

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Department of English

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## **Abstract**

### **FROM THE SUFFERING (BLACK) JESUS TO THE SACRILEGIOUS YEEZUS: REPRESENTATIONS OF CHRIST IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ART AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT**

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Broadly definable as an interdisciplinary study of religion, music, literature, and history, this thesis analyzes the music of Kanye West and its evolution from the tradition of African-American art and religious thought. Tracing the roots of West's rap music lyrically and thematically to its foundations in the slave songs, the blues, the literature/art of the Harlem Renaissance era, and the gangsta rap of Tupac Shakur, I explore how the catalog of his albums show a (post)modern evolution of African-American religious thought that first began in the slaves' paradoxical re-appropriation of the hegemonic religion of their masters. Furthermore, I illustrate how West's music evinces an evolution of the slaves' divided religious identity and contributes to the subversions against the hegemony and oppression of white (supremacist) Christianity by African Americans throughout history.

Methodologically, I employ the Du Boisian tropes of the veil and double consciousness and Gates's literary theory of Signifyin(g) as interpretive frameworks to show through close textual analysis how black artists' historical revisions of the figure of Jesus

undoubtedly mark a subversion against white Christianity through a challenging of its bifurcated realms of the sacred/profane. Therefore, I focus on the manifestations of the figure of Jesus Christ throughout the lineage of African-American and religious thought and how his traditional function within Christianity has been subversively re-appropriated and re-deployed through re-significations and re-contextualizations of his physical color and metaphysical/metaphorical offices and roles. In tracing the evolutions of Jesus throughout black history, I show how the body of Christ has served as the site of socio-cultural, political, racial, and theological conflicts. In demonstrating how the frameworks of both race and religion interact and collide in the historical battles over the metaphysical significations and physical color of Christ, I emphasize how each representation of Christ—whether the massa Jesus of the slave songs, the black lynched Jesus of the Harlem Renaissance era, the Black Jesus of Tupac Shakur’s gangsta rap, or the sacrilegious Yeezus/Jesus of Kanye West—reflects the contextual realities of African Americans. I illustrate how these changing representations of Jesus from one era to the next reveals the ways in which African Americans have both resisted against the hegemonic deployments of Christ(ianity) by white society and consistently drawn upon and revised their religious and artistic heritage.

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## **Introduction: Historical Contexts, Previous Scholarship, and Methodology**

### **Overview of Study**

The realms of the sacred and profane demarcate within historical Christianity the vast distance between holy God and sinful, fallen humanity. At its most basic understanding, the sacred—from either the Latin *sanctus*, the Greek *hagios*, or the Hebrew *kadosh*—refers to something “separated or set apart from other things” (Cunningham and Kelsay 28). Thus, in Biblical Christianity, God is “preeminently sacred or holy, and everyone else and everything else is holy or sacred only in relation to God” (28). Because this binary delineates the relationship between sacred God and profane humanity, it is foundational to Christian doctrine, theology, and ecclesiastical practices. However, the impact of the bifurcated realms of the sacred/profane is not merely limited to the internal practices of a given church or group of religious people; even more so, this qualitatively opposite yet inseparable pairing plays a significant role in creating the very societies and cultures in which we live. As Russell McCutcheon and William Arnal state: “...the use of [this binary pair]...makes a historically specific social world possible to imagine and move within, a world in which we can judge some actions as safe or dangerous, some items as pure or polluted, some knowledge as private or public, and some people as friend or foe” (119).

Consequently, this function of the sacred/profane to make “a historically specific social world possible to imagine and move within” can certainly be seen in the troubled history of the United States (119). Throughout the tumultuous forging of the nation, the ways in which



Christianity was enforced upon social, cultural, and political life ultimately entailed the establishment of what was considered sacred and what was considered profane. In relation to the institution of slavery, what resulted was the subjugation of African-Americans through, in part, the institution of Christianity. Indeed, it is common knowledge the complex relationship between the institutions of slavery and Western Christianity and the manner in which the latter both perpetuated systems of racism and led the charge for abolitionism. We understand, for example, that slaveowners eventually encouraged their slaves to practice Christianity in order to stymie any potential resistance within them. They sought to draw their slaves' attention to Biblical mandates of obedience to masters and reorientate their focus away from the misery of slavery to the hopes of an afterlife. Nevertheless, despite the oppressive intents of the slaveowners, what is astonishing is the appropriation of Christianity by those slaves themselves to subvert their owners and their hegemonic employment of religion. Christianity did not become for the African-American slaves a Marxian opium taken to dull or ease the painful realities of slavery; rather, it became a critical tool in which they resisted against those terrible conditions of slavery.

As the historical progression of black arts and religious thought has demonstrated since then—from postbellum America to the Civil Rights Movement—African Americans have continued to fight against the oppression brought on *by* white Western Christianity through a subversion *of* Christianity. Whether in the music of the slave songs or the literature and art of the Harlem Renaissance, African Americans have consistently and remarkably appropriated and re-deployed the contents of Christianity in efforts to overcome the oppressive social, cultural, political, and economic realities of their lives. Thus, as C. Eric Lincoln writes, the

origin and (on-going) development of African-American history is irrevocably linked to the religion of Christianity:

Perhaps more than any other people since the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt, the Blackamerican has been shaped and characterized by the unique place religion has occupied in his personal life and in the common destiny of the race. His American experience is inseparable from his religious heritage because for much of that history there was little else to offer meaning to existence, or to fall back upon for strength to confront the exigencies of his distressed condition.

(165)

In that regard, the history of how African Americans have assumed and transformed Western Christianity to meet their needs and empower their status is none other than history of white *and* black America

Furthermore, in this study I explore how one of the fundamental acts of subversion by African Americans historically against Western Christianity is through the disruption and destabilization of the realms of the sacred and profane at the core of its doctrinal and theological foundations. It is important to note briefly, though, the initial cultural clash faced by slaves from the Middle Passage and the effects of their previous West-African belief systems upon the sacred/profane structure of Western Christianity. Interestingly, as scholars have discussed, the bifurcated notions of “sacred” and “secular/profane” were “entirely foreign concepts to African slaves arriving in the Colonies” (Reed 5). Thus, at some level, the retentions of the slaves’ West-African religious worldviews—which did not account for the Christian dichotomy of good and evil—upon their newly assumed Christian religion naturally resulted, for a while, in something of a hybrid between their West African heritage

and Christianity (seen, as I discuss in a later chapter, most clearly in the music of slaves). Nonetheless, the God of Christianity would come to replace the gods of the slaves' West African past, and African Americans eventually subverted Western Christianity itself through an intentional and ingenious re-signification and re-contextualization of its sacred/profane structure. Most notably, Christianity's central figure Jesus Christ has historically been appropriated and re-deployed by African Americans to combat the oppression and racism of their lived realities.

Undoubtedly, the person of Jesus "played a leading role in the saga of race in America" (Blum and Harvey 5). His body has been from the outset of American history the site of racial, socio-cultural, and political contestation, serving as a transitory symbol of power and authentication for both white and black Americans. On the one hand, as Edward Blum and Paul Harvey explain, the physical features of Jesus were (re)imagined in ways that led to social constructions of "whiteness" and race: "By wrapping itself with the alleged form of Jesus, whiteness gave itself a holy face....With Jesus as white, Americans could feel that sacred whiteness stretched back in time thousands of years and forward in sacred space to heaven and the second coming" (8). However, on the other hand, and most important for the focus of this study, the figure of Jesus was conversely employed by other ethnicities such as African Americans to question those racist constructions of physical and metaphysical whiteness and blackness. By re-appropriating the egalitarian principles inherent in the biblical narratives of Christ and eventually making physically black the later emergence of a whitewashed Christ figure, African Americans challenged the hegemony of white Christianity and theology.

Central to all of the historical transformations of the figure of Jesus is a re-signification of the sacred and profane structure of Christianity. As the Son of God, Jesus Christ represents in traditional, orthodox Christianity the incarnated God in the flesh, a paradoxical embodiment of what was in the Old Testament deemed separately as sacred (God) and profane (humanity). Among Western religions, “the Christian doctrine of the incarnation presents a radical notion of the sacred as immanent”—that is, Jesus Christ as simultaneously both God and Man departs from traditional religions of “transcendence” (the notion that sacred reality is beyond regular, human experience) by radically presenting a deity in the flesh (Cunningham and Kelsay 29-31). According to orthodox Christianity, Jesus’s sacrificial death and resurrection from the grave marks the end of the Old Testament sacrificial system wherein a priest, who would sacrifice an animal on an altar as a conciliatory offering to God, served as the mediator between sacred God and profane humanity. In its fulfillment (Jesus being the ultimate sacrifice to God for humanity’s sins), Jesus serves as the new mediator between the sacred (God) and the profane (Man), himself being the reconciliatory God-in-the-flesh. Therefore, the historical re-significations and re-contextualizations of the figure of Jesus entail fundamentally a disruption of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity as a system of religion. By re-imagining Jesus—whether his color/ethnicity or his theological function/status—certain historically oppressed groups such as African Americans have reconstructed Christianity’s formerly separated boundaries of the sacred and profane.

From the songs of the slaves to the art of the Harlem Renaissance, from the Civil Rights Movement and liberation theology of the academy to the gangsta rap music of Tupac Shakur, the figure of Jesus has been consistently subverted, racialized, and transformed in response to the hegemony and hypocrisy of Western Christianity and American society. Each

of the representations of Jesus from the major stages of African-American religious thought, whether the “Massa Jesus” of slave songs or the ghetto Black Jesus of Tupac’s gangsta rap, marks a reimagining of the Jesus of orthodox Christianity through a disruption of Christianity’s (and white America’s own hegemonic employment of Christianity’s) sacred and profane structure. Throughout all of his various manifestations in African-American religious thought, Jesus is primarily cast as a figure of shared suffering—a high priest, as the writer of the book of Hebrews in the Bible says, who is able to “sympathize with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:15, ESV). To subvert the relationships socially constructed between whiteness/sacred and blackness/profane, African Americans re-signified Jesus as a metaphysically and physically black, suffering savior who challenged the racism of white Western Christianity. Hence, even though his statuses as King and future liberator certainly were championed as well, the subversive appropriation of the enslaving, hypocritical Jesus of white American Christianity was most clearly evident in his portrayal as a savior and companion who suffered alongside African-American people.

In the music of African-American rap artist Kanye West, however, a radical new figure of (Black) Jesus has emerged. From his album *Yeezus* (2013)—a title openly signifying a self-identification with the person of Jesus through a morphing of West’s hip-hop moniker “Yeezy” and the name Jesus—the traditional portrayal of the suffering Christ in black religious thought becomes further re-imagined into a symbol of materialistic excess and immorality. In this study I explore West’s radical signification upon the (Black) Jesus of African-American history. Methodically tracing the roots of West’s rap music lyrically and thematically to its foundations in the slave songs of the 1800s to the late 1990s gangsta rap of Tupac Shakur, I show how the catalog of his albums—specifically his first major release *The*

*College Dropout* (2004) and his most recent album *Yeezus*—evinces a modern evolution of African-American religious thought. I illustrate how Kanye West contributes to the history of black religious thought by intentionally signifying upon the historical tropes of Jesus within African-American religious music/art/theology in his early music and eventually transforming, in his later music, the traditional suffering Christ into a radical, liberating Jesus of decadence and hedonism. Lastly, I suggest that West's signification upon and identification with/as this sacrilegious (Black) Jesus of African-American religious tradition indicates a modern continuation of the Du Boisian double consciousness of black religious identity in its revolt against the neo-slavery of contemporary American capitalism and consumerism.

### **The Sacred and the Profane: Historical Contexts, Previous Scholarship, Applications**

Within the history of the study of religion, the binary of the sacred and profane has been a key area of contestation. Scholars have argued over questions of ontology, epistemology, sociology, and anthropology concerning its nature and function. Most significantly, what is at stake within these various issues stemming from the notions of the sacred and profane is the very category and sign of *religion* itself. As ostensibly inseparable terms existing mutually, the sacred and profane pairing has historically been understood as the foundation to the construction of religion as a belief system and practice. Generally speaking, the debates over the sacred and profane and its consequences for the study of religion as an academic field can be viewed broadly as a shift from substantivist definitions and conceptions of the sacred/profane within religion to conversely functionalist or culturalist ones. The former seeks to “locate the definition of religion within its key internal

attributes,” identifying religion by “particular features [the sacred and the profane] that inhere in its particular expressions”: the latter, by contrast, defines religion “in terms of what a phenomenon accomplishes for the social or individual *context* in which it occurs,” identifying religion “in terms of some fixed cultural role” (Arnal and McCutcheon 23). Significantly, then, functionalist definitions make arbitrary the content of substantivist conceptions of religion, destabilizing any fixed, totalizing boundaries between the sacred and profane. In other words, what one person may see as “sacred,” another person may see as “profane,” and vice versa (even within the same culture).

Mircea Eliade, one of the most influential scholars of religion in the twentieth-century, perhaps best represents the *sui generis* discourse on religion and the sacred/profane. In his work *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957)—which he acknowledges as a contribution to the lineage of Rudolf Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (1917)—Eliade presents a sweeping survey of world religions in order to define the sacred as “a reality of a wholly different other from ‘natural’ realities” (10). By distinguishing in a seemingly obvious manner the sacred as “*the opposite of the profane*,” he establishes a substantive boundary between the two, positing humanity’s correlative ability to differentiate the sacred from the profane experientially and phenomenologically (10). Eliade proposes the term “hierophany” to describe the way that the “*sacred shows itself to us*” as something “wholly different from the profane” (11). As he explains, “the sacred tree” and “stone” are “not adored as stone or tree” but worshipped rather “because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the *sacred*” (12). Consequently, these manifestations of the sacred through the medium of the profane—the making of “sacred” what was previously “profane” space—provide a “revelation of an absolute reality” that “ontologically founds the world” for humanity (21). For Eliade, then,

the terms sacred and profane not only categorically bifurcate the experiences of humanity—they also indicate the innate need of all humanity (a quest for meaning, if you will) for the sacred within the profane (*homo religiosus*), even despite the supposed increasing secularizing trends of modernity.

Within (post)modern academia, however, Eliade's then-landmark work on the sacred and profane has largely been criticized for its supposed totalizing accounts on the realms of this binary and its definition of religion as *sui generis*, or a phenomenon that is “distinct, unique, and self-caused” (McCutcheon 18). As Russell McCutcheon states in his well-known polemic against the *sui generis* formulations of religion *Manufacturing Religion* (1997), such substantivist definitions of religion “deemphasizes difference, history, and sociopolitical context in favor of abstract essences and homogeneity” (3). In fact, as McCutcheon goes on to argue, the manufacturing of *sui generis* religion is nothing more than “a scholarly representation that operates within, and assists in maintaining, a very specific set of discursive practices along with the institutions in which these discourses are articulated and reproduced” (37). Instead of existing as some trans- or a-historical private experience for humanity at large, functionalist or culturalist conceptions of religion held by McCutcheon and others conceive religion as a historically and politically social construction. The sacred and profane in such discourse, therefore, are merely “modern discursive invention[s],” “purely formal and arbitrary” markers which “set malleable limits that make almost anything possible to say” (Arnal and McCutcheon 21, 57, 128). As a result, the emptying of these paired signifiers—which, by extension, empties the category of religion of any concrete meaning—destroys any boundary between them and makes room for deconstructive play between the two signifiers. This resulting possibility of disruptive interplay between what is



considered “sacred” and conversely “profane” speaks to what Gordon Lynch deems as “the role of the mundane [secular/profane] in the construction of the sacred” (136).

Moreover, the on-going study of rap music (and hip-hop culture) within the fields of religion has reflected this ideological tension between substantivist and functionalist/culturalist conceptions of religion. Initial scholarship on rap music focused primarily on legitimizing its study within academia by elucidating its history and modern day significance to African-American culture and identity. Seminal works by notable scholars like Houston A. Baker, Jr. (*Black Studies, Rap, and the Academy*, 1993) and Tricia Rose (*Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, 1994) sought to validate the academic significance of rap music and hip hop culture by moving beyond the societal denigration of both as solely being excessively violent, misogynistic, and materialistic. Baker emphasizes in part, for example, on “the sites and history of rap’s black male productivity” and “the brilliance of its resonant inner-city inventiveness and strategies of resistance, while Rose—offering an excellent, in-depth introduction to the history of hip-hop and analysis of the form/structure of rap music as musical genre—argues that rap music “is a black cultural expression that prioritizes black voices from the margins of urban America” (*Black Studies* 62; Rose 2). Within both foundational studies, there is a common focus on how rap music and hip hop “articulate the shifting terms of black marginality in contemporary American culture”—whether that be “popular” American culture or the “academic” American university (Rose 3).

Near the publication of these works, cultural critics and scholars of religion like Michael Eric Dyson and Anthony B. Pinn began contributing to the academic legitimization of rap music/hip hop culture by focusing on what they saw as the religious and spiritual

sensibilities inherent within its historical context and production. Beginning from the standpoint of scholars like Baker and Rose who established rap as a “black idiom that prioritizes black culture and... articulates the problems of black urban life,” Dyson and Pinn found within rap music existential questions of meaning, life and death, and—ultimately—God (*Black Studies* 60). Accordingly, Dyson’s *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (1996) reads rap music/hip hop culture as the struggle between “the secular and the sacred,” “prosperity and poverty,” and—most of all—the “force of religious identities and secular passions” (xviii). In the same vein, Pinn states in the introduction to *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music* (2003) concerning the “battle between existential realities and religious sensibilities” in rap music: “Like the spirituals, the blues, and gospel, rap music has profound connections to the various religious traditions found within African American communities. It grapples with questions of meaning that are intimately connected to religious organizations and their thoughts and practices” (“Introduction”).

In their interpretations of how rap music is “religious,” therefore, Dyson and Pinn subscribe to substantivist conceptions of religion. That is, they read pertinent rap artists of the late 90s like Tupac Shakur as “prophetic” figures asking age-old issues of theodicy and expressing innate quests for meaning or salvation (in a manner hearkening to Eliade’s conception of the *homo religiosus* and the sacred/profane modes of being). Dyson’s *Holler if You Hear Me* (2001), a work focused on the life and music of Tupac, illustrates this theological or Christian reading of rap music: “...Tupac wrestles with a theodicy, the effort to square belief in God with the evil that prevails, which is at root an attempt to explain the suffering of those he loved” (129). Likewise, Pinn argues in the same fashion: “Tupac frames the exposing and unpacking of the spiritual dimension of his existence in ways, like African

American Christians, that recognize the absurd nature of historical realities” (“On a Mission from God” 146). Both scholars, consequently, stress the quests for (religious) meaning beneath the rap lyrics of Tupac (what Pinn calls the salvific “quest for complex subjectivity,” or “the urge toward a fuller sense of one’s meaning and importance within the context of community”) (“On a Mission from God” 144).

Furthermore, while Dyson and Pinn’s readings leave unquestioned for the most part the sacred/profane structure and system of Christianity, they do discuss in part the ways in which the “sacred” and the “profane” are at least questioned or challenged. To that point, Dyson notes: “What’s interesting about consecration is that Tupac Shakur is *deconsecrating* and, more to the point, *desacralizing* the world of religious belief” (*Open Mike* 285). And Pinn similarly asserts: “...Tupac Shakur...pose[s] a challenge to traditional conceptualization of conversion and religious experience” (“On a Mission from God” 152). Nevertheless, in their discussions of how Tupac’s search for existential, religious meaning entails an identification with a “Black Jesus” who embodies a destabilization of the sacred/profane, the nature/category of the religion of Christianity itself remains left intact. Though Dyson and Pinn may illustrate how Tupac’s rap music contains certain anomalous hybridizations of “sacred” Christianity with the “profane” realities of the “hood life,” their theological interpretations nonetheless adhere to and privilege the substantivist notions of the bifurcated realms of the sacred/profane. In other words, the sacred/profane within Tupac’s (and other rap artists’) music is understood only through the rigid framework of Christianity’s sacred/profane structure, thus leaving unquestioned the manner in which, for example, Tupac’s conception of Black Jesus may actually *subvert* the nature of Christianity instead of alternatively *inherently* expressing and maintaining Christian notions of the sacred/profane.

Ongoing trends in scholarship on rap music's relationship to religion have continued in the tradition of Dyson and Pinn's works by emphasizing the religious (most often *Christian*) sensibilities present *within* rap music. For example, Ebony Utley's study *Rap and Religion: Understanding the Gangsta's God* (2012) examines how "God plays an important role in the maintenance of a gangsta identity" in rap music (4). Her work, in large part, focuses on rap music's "[t]heodicy questions" that "comprise the central quest for meaning," and subsequently how "[r]ap's intimacy with social ills provides the primary context for a gangsta's God talk" (7). Similarly, in *Urban God Talk: Constructing a Hip Hop Spirituality* (2013)—a collection of essays intended to "demonstrate how scholars in different disciplines [African-American religious studies, Sociology, Psychology, Anthropology, and others] approach the study of hip hop, religion, and spirituality"—rap music and hip-hop culture are examined for their "profound spirituality" and advocacy of "religious views," even if those views are not "orthodox or systemic in anyway" (A.E. Johnson xii-xiii). Within this useful, assorted collection of scholarship, the basic premise amounts to, like before, the interpretative goal of finding the religious/spiritual already inherent within rap music/hip-hop culture. As a primary example, Weldon McWilliams IV asserts in one of the essays: "Today, spirituality in hip hop can be found inside the ones who are seeking to maintain its original cultural values and roots and rescue the art from being overtaken by the negative values that come with commercialism" (45-46). Again, these interdisciplinary studies of rap and religion, to a large degree, are founded upon *sui generis* conceptions of the category of religion—whether the religion at hand be Christianity or Islam—that leave unchallenged the nature of religion and its sacred/profane structure. Additionally, it bears noting briefly the rise of church-based academic scholarship focused on evangelistic outreaches to hip-hop

culture. Works like *The Black Church and Hip Hop Culture: Toward Bridging the Generational Divide* (2012) proffer ways the Black church can engage culturally with the Hip Hop generation in order to share the salvific messages of Christianity with them. In that sense, such studies do not primarily seek to expound the religious sensibilities within rap music/hip hop culture but rather are interested in welcoming and converting said culture into a Christian one.

However, in a recently released study, Monica Miller provides a break in the trend of scholarship on rap music and religion by exploring conversely the ways in which the “uses of religious rhetorics (and their effects)” in rap “serve for various (and often competing) social and cultural communities for Hip Hop” (4). Her work *Religion and Hip Hop* (2013), which focuses on hip-hop culture at large in addition to rap music specifically, interprets the lyrics and practices of the genre/lifestyle through a functionalist/culturalist conception of religion. Rather than explore the inherently religious within rap music, she examines the social and cultural *functions* of the religious rhetoric of rap artists. Miller asserts: “A sustained analysis of the varied uses and functions of religious rhetorics, and a consideration of what type of social and cultural work(s) are accomplished by such deployments, is precisely the work (and perspective) not yet taken up by religious studies in its engagement with Hip-Hop culture” (6). Consequently, her study directly critiques the works of those like Dyson and Pinn who “‘look’ for the religion” in rap music/hip-hop culture and departs from the *sui generis* definitions of religion prevalent in their scholarship. As Miller sums: “...we must get beyond our modernist lenses of religion *as* feeling, and get up to speed with religion *as* effect, strategy, and manufacturing of social, cultural, and political interests” (70). Most important for the focus of this study is her criticism of how the category (and structure) of religion is

left unquestioned in most scholarship on rap music (like Dyson and Pinn's studies on the inherent religiosity of Tupac's music). Conversely, Miller advocates for a "social construction and understanding of the category of religion when analyzing Hip-Hop culture," proposing a "turn towards evaluating religious uses in Hip-Hop culture as effects of larger social, political, cultural, and economic processes" (109).

Accordingly, in this study I examine the music of Kanye West and its historical lineage for both its apparent statements of religiosity and its disruption of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity. In that regard, my readings of black music, literature, and art consider substantivist *and* functionalist conceptions of religion. That is, in my interpretations of various eras of African-American art, I explore that art—from the songs of the slaves to the music of Kanye West—contributes to the history of African-American religious thought by both in their expressions of substantivist "religious" sensibilities (questions of theodicies and existential/identity crisis) and subversions of the category and system of religion as well. The latter, as I have asserted, occurs through a re-signification and disruption of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity—an act of subversion that challenges the hegemony of white appropriations of religion through the emptying and re-deploying of the category and signifiers of religion. The intent of this study, then, is not to enter debates about the merits of approaching the scholastic study of religion as either an a-historical, privatization of faith or a historically and politically social construction; rather, I believe that both conceptions of religion in tandem can provide useful insights into the history and evolution of African-American religious thought as expressed in black music and literature. As Lawrence Cunningham and John Kelsay write concerning the importance of this dualistic approach to studying religion:

Considerations of function are necessary but not sufficient to the task of defining religion; an adequate definition of religion must include a substantive component. Thus, although we acknowledge the significant role of religion in human responses to such problems as suffering and death, we also follow the indications of everyday speech and make distinctions between religious and nonreligious ways of approaching such problems. ‘Religion’ and ‘politics’ are not synonyms, although they may be closely related. Similarly, ‘religion’ and ‘morality’ or ‘religion’ and ‘science’ should be distinguished from one another, however much they may overlap. (18)

Therefore, because either definition of religion in isolation appears to overlook or unnecessarily disqualify certain aspects of the human experience of religion or its social, cultural, and political functions, I resist privileging one definition of religion or another. Though scholars like Arnal and McCutcheon criticize the use of terms like “religion” or “religious”—claiming both adhere to the “secularization thesis” that “the old, old story of how the primitive world was once homogeneously religious and, with the advent of modernity, was sadly disenchanting”—the resulting linguistic and semantic implications for any discussion of religion quickly become too problematic for the purposes of this study (13). As Arnal and McCutcheon note, certain contradictions in language immediately occur when the category of religion is emptied of any signifying difference from the non-religious, resulting in scholars who “critique the noun ‘religion’ while still relying on the adjective ‘religious’ or the supposedly internal quality known as religiosity” (13).

Consequently, although there are serious discussions within the field of religion about the category and definition of religion that are no doubt important and necessary, I adhere to

both substantivist and functionalist conceptions of religion, recognizing in my use of terms like “religion,” as Talal Asad reminds us, the myriad of historical, social, cultural, political, and experiential implications within its use:

To define is to repudiate some things and to endorse others. Defining what is religion is not merely an abstract intellectual exercise; it is not just what anthropologists or other scholars do. The act of defining (or redefining) religion is embedded in passionate disputes; it is connected with anxieties and satisfactions, it is affected by changing conceptions of knowledge and interest, and it is related to institutional disciplines. In the past, colonial administrations used definitions of religion to classify, control, and regulate the practices and identities of subjects... When definitions of religion are produced, they endorse or reject certain uses of a vocabulary that have profound implications for the organization of social life and the possibilities of personal experience. (39)

Thus, in my discussion of the historical roots of West’s music and its (post)modern contribution to the evolution of black religious thought, I consider both religion’s “profound implications for the organization of social life” and “possibilities of experience” and also the ways it has been historically deployed in order to “regulate the practices and identities of subjects” (39).

Central to this study’s discussion of substantivist and functionalist conceptions of religion in conjunction with African-American music, then, is the nature of the sacred and the profane in each definition of religion. The former substantivist model of the sacred and profane as autonomous, distinct realms that provide ontological meaning to humanity can provide, I argue, insights into the historical, oppressive deployments of religion (specifically



Christianity, in this study). Hence, I answer in this study: In what ways has the bifurcated notions of the sacred and profane in traditional, orthodox Christianity been employed theologically, societally, and culturally to perpetuate racist, hegemonic ideology? How has Christianity's sacred/profane structure been used to form hegemonic social constructions of race through the symbolic meanings attached to physical and metaphysical constructions of whiteness and blackness? Moreover, the latter functionalist model of the sacred and profane as essentially empty signifiers provides insights into the subversive, deconstructive play possible within the category and sign of religion. This emptying of the former concrete significations of religion not only challenges the "secularization thesis" mentioned above by Arnal and McCutcheon, it also allows us to "explore the porous boundary and creative tension between the seemingly secular and the seemingly religious" (Mahan 62). The "porous boundary and creative tension" between the sacred/profane when they become empty signifiers has been re-deployed throughout the history of African-American music and art to counter-act and subvert the oppressive deployments of Western Christianity by white society (62). To that effect, I answer: How were the constructions of whiteness and blackness, as formulated by white society through the sacred/profane structure of Christianity, subverted by the slaves in their songs through a subsequent re-signification and redeployment of the same sacred/profane signifiers of Christianity? How were the sacred/profane boundaries challenged in the seemingly secular and sexually promiscuous music of the blues? In what ways does Kanye West's catalog of albums both demonstrate these historical disruptions of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity and express a further deconstruction of the sacred/profane?

Because this study—as the above questions imply—entails a study of the historical lineage of West’s music, I begin by exploring these notions of the sacred/profane and Christianity within the songs of the slaves and continue chronologically to the blues, the literature and art of the Harlem Renaissance era, and the gangsta rap of Tupac Shakur. TO that point, while much scholarship on the religious and secretly subversive nature of the slave songs has been done, scholarship on the religiosity of the seemingly secular blues is comparatively less plentiful. James Cone’s landmark scholarship *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (1972) began the discussion on the religious sensibilities of the blues by forging a connection between the two, disproving the former misconception that the blues (like the initial scholarship on rap music later) was devoid of any religious or spiritual merit. From the premise that, along with being social and political, “[b]lack music is also theological,” Cone “uncover[s] the theological presuppositions of black music as reflected in the spirituals and the blues, asking: What do they tell us about black people’s deepest aspiration and devotion?” (7). Deeming the blues as “secular spirituals,” Cone finds a spiritual and religious connection between the two eras of black music (7).

Jon Michael Spencer in *Blues and Evil* (1993) continues in the tradition of Cone’s scholarship by further emphasizing the religious sensibilities inherent within the blues. Challenging the scholarship of early blues scholars like Paul Oliver who claimed the blues was merely secular and “devoid of spiritual values,” Spencer argues for an interpretation of the blues through its “synchronous duplicity”—“being both sacred *and* profane”—retained from its West African heritage (xiv). He states: “Because the misinterpreters of the mythologies of the blues have failed to grasp the synchronous duplicity of the blues and of black ‘blues people’, they have also failed to comprehend the doubleness of African-

American ontology and the elasticity of black reality, which together account for the depth and strength of black spirituality found in the blues” (13). Accordingly, Spencer attempts to highlight the religiosity of the blues by focusing on its “conflation” of Christian mythology (“the Adamic and its recessive tragic”) with African mythology (“the trickster and subsequent badman”) (12). Similarly, his theological reading of the blues (which he deemed elsewhere “theomusicology,” or a “musicological method for theologizing about the sacred” and the “secular”) is shared by Teresa L. Reed in *The Holy Profane: Religion in Black Popular Music* (2003). In that work, Reed argues—like Cone and Spencer—for a religious interpretation of the blues, stating that “the references to religion in blues lyrics show a gradual yet significant occurrence in African-American history—the postbellum shift in black-American religious consciousness” (39). Moreover, she also explores notions of the sacred/profane in blues music as well, positing like Spencer that the fusion of sacred/profane realities in West-African music directly influenced the religious sensibilities of the seemingly secular blues.

These discussions of the sacred and profane within blues music by Spencer and Reed build upon the work of Cone and provide useful insights into the West-African religious retentions within blues. More importantly, for the focus of this study, they also work to disprove the secularization thesis as discussed so far—namely, that despite the previous consensus of the blues being devoid of any religious content, there is nonetheless present within it a dynamic between the sacred and the profane. Nevertheless, like the scholarship of Dyson and Pinn, their interpretations of the sacred/profane within blues music primarily rests upon substantivist conceptions of religion, leaving unquestioned for the most part the deconstructive implications of the sacred/profane realities of blues music on the nature and

category of religion (Christianity). As I show in this study, the music of the blues, in some ways, can be seen as a parodic signification upon the religion of the slaves that evinces an evolution of important religious sensibilities from the slave songs before it.

Furthermore, in the blues re-significations and re-contextualizations of the religion of the slaves, the sacred/profane structure of Christianity is disrupted through a collapsing of those realms—most notably in the fusion of the sacred/religious with the profane/sexually promiscuous. Consequently, whereas the sacred/profane structure of Christianity is re-deployed, so to speak, in the slave songs in order to combat the hegemonic constructions of whiteness/sacred and blackness/profane, the music of the blues signifies upon those notions of the sacred/profane within the slave songs in an act of parodic revision that challenges the nature and category of religion/Christianity itself. This process of signification within the history of black music and religious thought, I argue, continues throughout the literature/art of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, the liberation theology of the academy in the 1970s, the gangsta rap music of Tupac Shakur in the 1990s, and the modern day rap music of Kanye West in the 2000s.

Finally, the primary figure of this process of signification and revision throughout the history of black music and religious thought that this study focuses on is the person of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the changing manifestations of Jesus from the slave songs to Kanye West encapsulates the destabilization of Christianity's sacred/profane structure that occurs throughout the history of black art and religious thought. Whether it be through the changing of his ethnicity or the reconfiguring of his orthodox divine nature, these evolving representations of Jesus throughout black history challenge both substantivist and functionalist conceptions of religion/Christianity in their reimagining of religious faith,

Christian theology, and the very nature and sign(ification) of religion. Though a multitude of scholarship on the person of Jesus Christ from many different scholastic fields exists—religious, theological, historical, anthropological, and sociological—the available scholarship on the coloring and reinventions of Jesus in black religious history is far less comparatively.

Kelly Brown Douglas's *The Black Christ* (1994) is perhaps the most complete study focused on the changing figure of Christ from the time of slavery to the liberation theology of the 1960s-70s. Douglas's work is an excellent, foundational work on the figure of Jesus in the history of black religious thought that this study contributes to. Asserting the centrality of the "presence of a sustaining and liberating Christ" to the "Black Christian experience," she analyzes throughout her work the physical and theological significance of the various historical manifestations of Jesus (2). Douglas states:

Fundamentally, a proper understanding of the Black Christ ought to refer to both Christ's physical appearance and to Christ's relationship to the Black freedom struggle. The Blackness of Christ then is not determined by images or actions alone. A defining assumption of this book is that to call Christ "black" suggests something about both Christ's appearance and actions. (5)

More recently, Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey in *The Color of Christ* (2012) have explored, as the title suggests, the historical ideological battles at the site of the body of Jesus. Providing an excellent, sweeping survey of how "the supposed Son of God played a leading role in the saga of race in America," Blum and Harvey explore "the ways Americans gave physical forms to Jesus, where they placed them, and how they remade [Jesus] visually time and again into a sacred symbol of their greatest aspirations, deepest terrors, lowest actions, highest expressions, and mightiest strivings for racial power and justice" (5, 7).

Focusing primarily on issues of race, they discuss, in part, how images of a white Jesus in early America were used to create hierarchal constructions of whiteness/sacred and blackness/profane; furthermore, they illustrate how those same constructions of the “whiteness” of Jesus were “secretively transformed [by oppressed ethnic peoples] to undermine white power or to create experiences that mediated and challenged racial discrimination (8).

In this study of the figure of Jesus through the sacred/profane structure of Christianity, then, I contribute to Douglas’s and Blum and Harvey’s scholarship by exploring the process of revision/signification throughout the history of black art and religious thought. I attempt to show how these historical revisions reveal a continual redeployment and re-signification of the sacred and profane signifiers foundational to the Christian religion in ways that combat white, oppressive appropriations of Christianity and deconstruct, as well, the very category and nature of religion. Each of the representations of Jesus from the major stages of African-American religious thought, whether the Massa Jesus of slave songs or the ghetto Black Jesus of Tupac’s rap, provides unique insight into the African-American religious identity of a given historical context and also the changing conceptions/disruptions of religion from one historical context to the next.

### **Methodology: Interdisciplinarity and Interpretative Frameworks**

Broadly speaking, this study can be seen as an interdisciplinary study of popular culture (rap music) and religion (Christianity). Though the legitimacy of studying popular culture is perhaps commonly accepted in today’s academia, the field of popular culture and religion is still a developing area of scholarship. Therefore, at its most basic level, the “simplest reason

for the study of popular culture and religious studies is that the study of popular cultural artifacts can lead to insights into issues that transcend popular culture” (Clark 8). Because popular culture “appeals to our emotions and processes of identification”—making it a “prime location for communicating significant ideals and ideas”—the study of popular culture can provide “the framework through which understandings of religion can be shaped or maintained” (10-11).

For the purpose of this study, then, the study of popular culture and religion “raises questions of definition,” such as: “What is ‘religion’?” and “How is the ‘sacred’ related to the ‘secular’?” (Mahan 51). Indeed, because the study of popular culture (the everyday, mundane, commonplace) and religion (the sacred) also inherently adheres to *functionalist* or *culturalist* models of religion, it serves as a useful framework in which to explore the various manifestations, re-significations, and re-contextualizations of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity throughout the history of African-American music, literature, and religious thought (indeed, blues could be seen as a popular music of its era). Concerning the interplay of the sacred and profane signifiers in the study of popular culture and religion, Lynch asks: “What can we learn from these instances of the playful and ironic use of sacred symbols in contemporary media and popular culture? What might this tell us about the ways in which the sacred may not only compel and bind people, but also become a focus for various forms of resistance against the lure of the sacred in the contemporary world?” (141). In the music of Kanye West—as well as in its historical lineage in the slave songs to the rap music of Tupac—we can see such a “playful and ironic use of sacred symbols” and its potential as “forms of resistance” against the “lure [and hegemonic employment] of the sacred” in the contemporary [and historical] world.”

Moreover, as Jeffrey Mahan emphasizes, “readings” in popular culture and religion “must be shaped by our unique theological perspectives *and* by a deeper understanding of the forms, structures, and cultural histories of the popular material that we study” (58). A failure to “put the relationships between religion and popular culture in historical context,” Mahan continues, risks the error of scholars “being contemporists” who erroneously suggest that popular culture is a “product of late modernity or post-modernity” (59). As David Morgan firmly states: “The study of religion [and popular culture] is necessarily historical” (27). In that regard, the majority of this study seeks to establish “a deeper understanding” of the historical contexts of Kanye West’s music, tracing its roots lyrically and thematically all the way back to the slave songs. By paying attention to “issues of historical difference” within the lineage and evolution of African-American religious thought as expressed in black art, I hope to “nuance our understanding of the nature and significance of sacred objects” (Lynch 141).

In addition to the importance of historical context, the study of popular culture and religion requires methodologically an “ongoing reflection of its inherent interdisciplinarity” (Morgan 24). Though this may lead, as David Morgan writes, to “[i]nterdisciplinary scholars of popular religious culture fac[ing] the constant stumbling block of being outsiders” to other “domains of research” they may not be experts in (e.g. history, anthropology, sociology, or religion), it does not prevent scholars of various fields from “produc[ing] work that is a service to colleagues in many disciplines who agree that the nature of popular culture and religion stretches beyond the limits of any single discipline” (25). As Lynn Clark writes:

The study of religion and popular culture is inherently interdisciplinary, drawing upon those theories and methodologies from sociology, anthropology,



philosophy, psychology, history, literary criticism, and media studies. Differences in methodology, concerns, and philosophical commitments tend to vary according to disciplines, and thus whereas the field (if indeed it might be called a field) will never be standardized, there are ways in which scholars might learn from compatriots who hail from different disciplines. (16)

Consequently, though I do not engage certain aspects of the field of popular culture and religion that are undoubtedly important—such as reception studies regarding how, for example, the music of Kanye West may influence an audience’s religious practices—my goal is both to provide a historical reading of West’s popular music that may be a “service to colleagues” in various “disciplines” and also to “learn [myself] from compatriots who hail from different disciplines.” (To that point, scholars like Miller, Utley, and Sharon Lauricella have begun studying how an audience or group of people may receive the music of seemingly secular rap artists in seemingly religious ways). As a historical and literary analysis of African-American art, this study primarily engages in a textual criticism and investigation of the sacred/profane dynamics within the history of black religious thought. Therefore, while I rely upon religious and theological frameworks and contexts, this study is methodologically and theoretically grounded in a historical and literary study of *language*. Hence, I employ the Du Boisian tropes of the “veil” and double consciousness and the literary theory of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. as interpretative frameworks to show through close textual analysis how black artists’ historical revisions of Jesus and deconstructions of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity undoubtedly evince both a subversion against the hegemonic uses of Western Christianity and a disruption of the category and sign(ification) of religion itself.

As Gates writes in his landmark work *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (1988), the “black tradition is double-voiced” (xxv). In that sense, W. E. B. Du Bois’s famous metaphors of the veil and “double consciousness”—in which one “ever feels his two-ness” (“two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body”)—can be identified as a prevalent “trope” within the African-American artistic tradition and, therefore, a useful framework in which to explore the black religious identity throughout the contextual eras of black history (DuBois 9). In that regard, my use of Du Bois’s metaphors as interpretative frameworks is not unprecedented within African-American scholarship. Robert Beckford, for example, employs the Du Boisian metaphor of double consciousness (“being inside and outside of a situation”) to illustrate his “critical perspective on the business of doing theology and culture” within the academy (122-23). Likewise, Michael Royster utilizes Du Bois’s concept of double consciousness to analyze how “such a phenomenon impacts individual and collective spiritual formation” in hip hop culture and rap music (21). Though much scholarship has been written delineating the historical traditions from which Du Bois no doubt appropriated the term and notion of “double consciousness” (from the transcendentalism of Emerson to the emerging medical psychology of his time), I interpret and employ for the purposes of this study his analysis of the African-American identity primarily as the division of the black religious identity—however we may want to define “religious” in this context.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that until recently, most scholars of religion have ignored Du Bois’s contributions to religious studies, focusing instead on his reputations as a “distinguished scholar of race relations, African and American history, and culture and politics” (Zuckerman, “Introduction” 1). As Blum and Jason Young explain: “Despite Du

Bois's voluminous writings on religion—from the prayers he penned for his students at Atlanta University to his many essays and stories containing religious themes—scholars have downplayed or outright ignored the central role of religious ideas and subjects in his scholarly and personal imagination” (x). Indeed, while Du Bois would verbally reject religion near the end of his life for the atheistic credences of Communism, he nevertheless consistently employed religious language throughout his writings (an interplay of sacred and profane realms in itself, as I discuss in the next chapter). Indisputably, Du Bois “was unable to keep his hands off religion's resources” (Kahn 5). Accordingly, scholarship within recent years has shown how the essentialist, totalizing portrayals of Du Bois as strictly an atheist elides the paradoxical, complex relationship he had with religion throughout his life. Phil Zuckerman states: “One minute he could praise religious institutions and speak of religion sympathetically and in the next minute denounce religious institutions and speak of religion in unrelentingly harsh terms. Such a position could be characterized as contradictory or schizophrenic. Or it might be characterized as simply realistic” (“Introduction” 8). Thus, as Kahn succinctly implies, Du Bois's paradoxical relationship with religion might be seen as a mirroring the same deconstructive interplay between notion of the sacred/religious and profane/secular by African-American artists throughout black history: “...a crucial characteristic of Du Bois's irreligion is that it often gives expression to his religious longings. At these moments, his irreligion itself turns religious” (7).

Du Bois's concept of the double consciousness of the African-American identity, then, must be understood primarily through the historical lens of African-American religion. As Kahn again convincingly notes: “...the reason Du Bois uses religion as the catalyst for the veil section of *Souls* is that *religion is the matrix out of which a critical double consciousness*

*arises*” (53, emphasis mine). Hence, in his depiction of the “history of the American Negro” as one marked by the “longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self,” Du Bois speaks foremost to the religious identity of blacks that began within the times of slavery and continues, it could be argued, to our present day (*Souls* 9). As Dickson D. Bruce avers: “...for Du Bois the essence of a distinctive African consciousness was its spirituality, a spirituality based in Africa but revealed among African Americans in their folklore, their history of patient suffering, and their faith. In this sense, double consciousness related particularly to Du Bois’s efforts to privilege the spiritual in relation to the materialistic, commercial world of white America” (238). Therefore, while Du Bois’s notion of double consciousness certainly refers to the “white stereotypes in black life and thought” and the “practical racism that excluded every black American from the mainstream of the society,” his metaphor speaks fundamentally to the historical, fragmented religious identity of African Americans. Indeed, it is “precisely *because* Du Bois understands religion as the primary African American moral, political, historical, and aesthetic response to time-bounded complexities of race...that he chooses religion as the leaven for double consciousness” (Kahn 53). And that divided religious identity, as implied by Bruce, is intrinsically tied—from its very inception during slavery—to the contradictions, oppressions, and capitalism of white American Christianity and society.

The DuBoisian metaphor of double consciousness, then, serves as an insightful interpretative framework in which to explore the divided African-American religious identity as expressed throughout the history of black art. As an ideological model referring historically to the personal, divided religious identity of African Americans, it also serves as a framework in which to view and study the changing substantivist conceptions and roles of

Christianity within the history of black art and religious thought. To that effect, I answer in this study: How can the slaves' re-deployment of their masters' oppressive use of Christianity be seen as evincing the historical double consciousness of black religious identity? How does the blues' fusion of the sacred and profane through a sexualizing of the sacred exhibit an evolution of the slaves' divided religious identity? In what ways does Tupac's desire *for* and identification *as* "Black Jesuz" further express a "modern" (late 90s) manifestation of the double consciousness of black religious identity? And finally, how can Kanye West's rejection of the suffering Black Jesus figure (in his late music) and alternative creation of a sacrilegious Jesus figure be seen as a (post)modern reimagining of the divided black religious identity?

Furthermore, the correlative Du Boisian metaphor of the veil, which serves both as the boundary between the African American and white American and the medium in which the African-American "sees" himself, provides a framework in which to study the sacred/profane structure of religion within these substantivist conceptions of Christianity and double consciousness. Ostensibly, Du Bois's metaphor of the veil—used for the first time in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903)—certainly entails many different allusions, whether the "old African American folklore" where certain children are born with a "caul, amniotic veil" that grants them "insight into the invisible realm" or the more personal autobiographical moment in the young Du Bois's life when he realized he was "shut from [the white] world by a vast veil" (Lynn 232-233). As Carole Lynn summarizes:

As a sign and symbol, the veil expresses many different meanings: 1) it specifies the in-between in the world of slaves; 2) it is the mark of oppression; 3) it is the space of American tragedy; 4) it signals the possibility of the creation of public

spaces for conversation and the creation of authentic American persons; and, finally, 5) it marks a limit that has to be confronted before true freedom can be an American reality. (233)

While all of these interpretations of the Du Boisian veil are no doubt viable, for the purposes of this study, a sixth signification can be added, I argue, to help elucidate the dynamics of the double consciousness of the African-American religious identity: it provides a counter-hegemonic demarcation and designation of blackness (African-Americans) as “sacred” and whiteness (white Americans) as “profane.” Such an interpretative employment of the DuBoisian veil as signifying notions of the sacred/profane requires understanding the Du Boisian metaphor as an allusion to the Old Testament sacrificial system and the veil separating the Holy of Holies from the Holy Place.

Within the tabernacle of the Old Testament sacrificial system, the innermost room was deemed the “Holy of Holies, or the Most Holy Place” (Gammie 16) It served as the most sacred room of the tabernacle—“the presence of God in his holiness and glory”—a place no ordinary human but the God-ordained high priest could enter once a year to offer sacrifice for the people’s sins on the Day of Atonement (16). Separating this innermost Holy of Holies from the outer sections of the tabernacle was a thick curtain, or a veil (meaning in the Hebrew a “screen, divider, or separator that hides”) that separated sacred, holy God from sinful, profane humanity. While it is certainly impossible to ascertain whether Du Bois specifically had the Old Testament veil in mind when writing *Souls*, the Du Boisian metaphor of the veil can nonetheless also be seen, I argue, as a re-signification and re-contextualization of the white hegemonic notions of the sacred/profane and whiteness/blackness. As Edward Blum states concerning the Old Testament religious

imagery in Du Bois's employment of the veil: "To Du Bois, a veil of racial separation functions similarly in America. It not only divided whites and blacks from one another but also from God" (79). In that sense, the "two-ness" or double consciousness of the historical African-American religious identity—the inherent contradiction of being oppressed by white America's hegemonic employment of Christianity and yet appropriating that same Christian religion as a counter-hegemonic act—is best understood through the symbolism of the veil as a re-deployment of the signifiers of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity. In that regard, I answer: How do the slave songs both reify the demarcated realms of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity and also re-signify their hegemonic constructions of sacred/whiteness and profane/blackness by white America? How does the blues fusion of the sexually promiscuous (profane) and sacred (religiosity) mark a collapsing or tearing of the veil previously separating the sacred/profane structure of Christianity held by the slaves? In what ways can the art and literature of the Harlem Renaissance be seen as a return, of sorts, to the separated yet re-signified realms of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity within the slave songs? In what ways does the fusion or collapsing of the sacred/profane realms in Tupac's music entail a revision and continuation of both the slave songs and blues deconstruction of the sacred/profane? And finally, how does Kanye West's catalog of albums revise the tradition of black music and religious thought by further reimagining the sacred/profane structure of Christianity?

What is fascinating, moreover, is the theological, religious, and historical significance of the figure of Jesus to these questions of the veil (sacred/profane) and the divided black religious identity. According to orthodox Christianity, Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection—as both God and man—satisfies for all time the yearly Old Testament

sacrificial system, thus literally and symbolically destroying the veil in the tabernacle formerly separating God and humanity. Literally, as the gospels of the New Testament record, the “veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” during the moment of Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross (the direction of “top to bottom” signifying the catalyst of the act as divine) (Mark 15:38). Symbolically, it provided humanity through “faith” in the person and sacrificial act of Jesus Christ with the opportunity and “confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He [Jesus] inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh” (Hebrews 10:19-20). Hence, in the theology of orthodox Christianity, Jesus Himself not only destroys the former veil separating God from humanity—He *becomes* the veil, or medium, by which the two can now be united.

Consequently, in relation to the historical, divided religious identity of African-Americans, the person of Jesus serves theologically or religiously as *the* medium by which any resolution or reconciliation of “double consciousness” is possible. Therefore, the historical “spiritual strivings” of African Americans to resolve the double consciousness of their religious identity—from the slave songs on—expresses itself through the transitory symbol of Jesus Christ, the central figure of orthodox Christianity. The revisions and re-significations of the figure of Jesus throughout black music, literature, and religious thought both evince the historical reifications of the fragmentation of the African-American religious identity and the attempts by African Americans to answer the ever-present, existential crisis of suffering that has marked the history of blacks within an American society that refused to allow them a unified “better and truer” self (*Souls*11).

Finally, then, in my study of the disruptions of Christianity’s sacred/profane structure throughout the history of black art and religious thought, I also employ methodologically



Gates's literary theory of Signifyin(g). While Du Bois's metaphors of the veil and double consciousness provide useful frameworks in which to explore substantivist conceptions of (the Christian) religion in African-American history, Gates's literary theory provides a framework in which to explore as well the deconstructive re-significations of the signifiers of Christianity's sacred/profane structure possible within functionalist conceptions of religion. Indeed, the very figures upon which Gates forms his theory of literary criticism—the African trickster god Esu-Elegbara and the African-American poetic character the Signifying Monkey—mark an interplay of the realms of the sacred and profane that challenges the bifurcated sacred/profane realms of Christianity. While Esu represents linguistically within the history of African-American folklore the “ultimate copula” connecting “truth with understanding,” “the sacred with the profane,” and “text with interpretation,” the Signifying Monkey embodies the deconstructive possibilities within African-American vernacular—the “open-endedness of figurative language” (*The Signifying Monkey* 6, 42).

Because Gates's interpretative model relies primarily upon the “political, semantic” conflict between the “two parallel discursive universes” of the “black ‘Signification’” and “the English [white] signification”—the former emptying the latter of its prior significations and replacing it with its own reservoir of unique, black rhetorical devices—it serves as a useful framework in which to explore the historical ways in which the signifiers of the sacred/profane have been emptied of its previous white, hegemonic deployments by African Americans and subsequently redeployed with new meaning (*The Signifying Monkey* 45). In other words, because the African-American act of Signifyin(g) entails, fundamentally, a deconstruction of the “nature of the sign=*signified/signifier* equation itself” (“a profound disruption at the level of the signifier”), it can provide insight into how African Americans

have historically “critique[d] the nature of (white) meaning itself,” “challeng[ing] through a literal critique of the sign the meaning of meaning” (46-47). In this study, therefore, I employ Gates’s theory of African-American literary criticism to explore how the signifiers of the sacred/profane foundational to Christianity have been “disrupted” in subversive acts of deconstruction that “critique” and “challenge” both the “nature of (white) meaning” and the nature and category (*sign*) of religion itself. Indeed, it is through the *language* of Christianity that *Christianity itself* has been redeployed, re-signified, and, at times, deconstructively subverted by African Americans.

Furthermore, this historically deconstructive act at the fundamental “level of the signifier” by African Americans also involves a purposeful revision of the black artistic tradition. As Gates states concerning his interpretative model:

Writers Signify upon each other’s texts by rewriting the received textual tradition. This can be accomplished by the revision of tropes. This sort of Signifyin(g) revision serves, if successful, to create a space for the revising text. It also alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand *to* the tradition....Signifyin(g) is the figure of Afro-American literary history, and revision proceeds by riffing upon tropes. (*The Signifying Monkey* 124).

In this study, accordingly, I argue that the process of re-significations and re-contextualizations of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity which occur throughout the progressive eras of black music, literature, and religious thought can be seen as acts of *revision* and Signification which “alters fundamentally the way we read the tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand *to* the tradition.” Though Gates himself is concerned

primarily with literature in his landmark study, he nevertheless suggests the application of his theory to *all* forms of African-American art: “It is this principle of repetition and difference, this practice of intertextuality, which has been so crucial to the black vernacular forms of Signifyin(g), jazz—and even its antecedents, the blues, the spirituals, and ragtime...” (64).

The specific types of revision and Signification that Gates emphasizes, furthermore, are “parody” and “pastiche.” The former entails a “hidden polemic”—a revision upon and repetition of the African-American tradition “with a *difference*” (107-111). The latter entails “literary echoes,” an underscoring of a text’s relation to the African-American tradition that can be a “joyous proclamation of antecedent and descendant texts” (xxvi-xxvii). These forms of revision, moreover, occur within the history of black art and religious thought. The various re-significations and re-contextualizations of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity in African-American history—as first appropriated and re-deployed in the slave songs and further re-imagined by Kanye West in modern times—can be viewed as historical revisions of parody and pastiche from one era to the next. Consequently, some questions I answer in this study are: How do the blues parody the slaves’ religion through a critique and reinterpretation of the black preacher figure? In what ways can Tupac’s conception of a “Black Jesuz” be seen as a pastiche—a literary “echo”—of the suffering Black Jesus figure of the slave songs and subsequent literature and art of the Harlem Renaissance? How does West’s early music Signify upon the historical suffering (Black) Jesus figure of black religious thought in the form of pastiche, and how does his reimagining in his later music of a sacrilegious Jesus conversely revise all of the previous suffering Black Jesus figures?

As most scholars generally agree, a lineage of direct influence can be traced throughout African-American history—an influence that no doubt reveals the Signifyin(g) processes of

repetition and revision. Accordingly, VaNatta S. Ford asserts in her essay on the “connectedness” of hip hop music to the blues and gospels that “hip hop music is directly connected with these earlier secular and religious musical forms through its emergence, form, consent, and function. . . hip hop is the artistic progeny between the union of its sacred matriarch, gospel music, and its secular patriarch, the blues” (85). Likewise, Darrell Wesley argues: “Like the spirituals and blues, rap music offers a radical way of viewing and experiencing the world through being a part of counter-hegemonic movement” (73). Furthermore, scholars like Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. have employed the interconnectedness and nature of African-American music as interpretative frameworks in which to study the history of black music and literature. For instance, in asserting that “Afro-American culture is a complex, reflexive enterprise which finds its proper figuration in blues conceived as a matrix,” Baker finds within the blues’ “veritable playful festival of meaning” and “phylogenetic recapitulation. . . of species experience” a viable manner in which to study the history of black literature and lived experiences (*Blues, Ideology* 3, 5).

More specific to the focus of this study, Floyd applies Gates’s theory of literary criticism to study the historical progression of African-American music all the way back to its beginnings in the slave songs. Incorporating with Gates’s theory Sterling Stuckey’s scholarship on the slave songs as being “central to the ring and foundational to all subsequent Afro-American music-making,” Floyd’s theory of “musical Signifyin(g)” explores the way black music historically revises upon its own tradition, “transform[ing]” previous musical forms by “using it rhetorically or figuratively (“through troping, in other words”) (“Ring Shout!” 138, 141). As he later writes in his *The Power of Black Music* (1995), his expansive study on his concept of musical Signifyin(g):

...African survivals exist not merely in the sense that African-American music has the same characteristics as its African counterparts, but also that the musical *tendencies*, the mythological beliefs and assumptions, and the interpretative strategies of African Americans are the same as those that underlie the music of the African homeland...these tendencies and beliefs continue to exist as African cultural memory, and...they continue to inform the continuity and thorough elaboration of African-American music. (5)

Consequently, though this study seeks to trace in a similar manner the roots and influences of Kanye West's rap music to its origins in the slave songs and onward, I explore lyrically and thematically through close textual analysis—paying close attention to the deconstructive possibilities within *language*—the manner in which West Signifies upon notions of the sacred/profane and the figure of Jesus within that history of black art and religious thought.

Nevertheless, in relation specifically to the rap music of Kanye West, I do consider certain aspects of the form of music itself. In part, I illustrate how the musical act of “sampling” in West's rap music—the appropriation of various musical genres and song “clips” within the history of black music—serves as an important act of Signifyin(g) both musically and thematically. In many ways, the rap production tool of samplers is one of *the* creative hallmarks of rap music that distinguishes it from the lineage of black music before it. Although the process of sampling is ostensibly “about paying homage” and invoking “another's voice to help you say what you want to say,” it is also, most importantly, a “process of cultural literacy and intertextual reference” (Rose 89). In its affirmation of “black musical history” and location of “‘past’ sounds in the ‘present,’” sampling is undoubtedly an act of revision and Signification (89). As Gates notes in the introduction to the 25th

anniversary edition of *The Signifying Monkey*, the act of sampling in rap music entails “something quite innovative in the history of African American music” (“Introduction” xxxi). By engaging in “literal quotation as formal innovation,” rap music not only “honor[s] canonical songs by repeating key segments of them,” it also “*become[s] part of them as they become signal parts of the new composition*” (xxxii). My particular focus on the sampling within certain songs of West deals with his purposeful Signification upon, for example, the slave songs and blues traditions. Still, as I have emphasized, West’s revision of the history of black music, literature, and religious thought also involves foremost the citation and reimagining of established tropes (figure of Jesus) and notions of the sacred/profane as well. Thus, in my analysis of certain songs on West’s recent album *Yeezus*, I explore—for example—both how the sampling of Billie Holiday’s “Strange Fruit” in the song “Blood on the Leaves” evinces a Signification upon and modern revision of the classic protest song about lynching and how, alternatively, the figure of a sacrilegious (Black) Jesus in “I Am a God” revises the historical suffering Black Jesus of black religious thought through a deconstructive parody of that figure’s sacred/profane structure. By engaging in such scholarship throughout this study, I demonstrate the connectedness and evolutions of African-American music, literature, and religious thought from slavery to our modern times.

### **Chapter Outline**

In the first chapter of this study, I establish the interpretative and theoretical frameworks of my study and how I approach the history of black religious thought. I explain the academic and critical merit of tracing the transformations of Jesus in African-American

history from the slave songs to the music of Kanye West through the lenses of Du Bois's metaphors and Gates's literary theory.

In the second chapter, I discuss the history of black and white relations and the ways in which the African (American) served as a the site of the construction of white identity. I then explore the birth of the African-American divided religious identity and how it was characterized by their paradoxical re-appropriation of their master's hegemonic religion.

In the third chapter, I explore the counter-hegemonic re-significations of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity within the slave songs and discuss how they evince a challenging of the oppressive constructions of blackness as profane. Moreover, I analyze how these disruptions of white America's construction of sacred/whiteness and profane/blackness through the perverse deployment of Christianity are embodied in the figure of "Massa Jesus" in the slave songs. I propose that the re-appropriation and redeployment of the figure of Jesus in the slave songs express the division inherent within the historical black religious identity—the paradox of fighting against the oppressive enforcement of Christianity through an re-appropriation of Christianity itself.

In the fourth chapter, I discuss how the music of the blues Signifies upon the songs and religion of the slaves through a parodying of the black preacher figure and a fusion of the sacred with the profane/sexually promiscuous. I demonstrate how the collapsing of the sacred/profane realms of Christianity in the blues evinces both a critique of the religion of the slaves and a challenging of the very category and nature of religion itself. Its disruption of the Du Boisian veil separating the sacred from the profane through the collapsing of sexuality with religiosity, I contend, deconstructs the former slaves' conceptions of religion and empties religion as sign (signifier/signified) of its content.

In the fifth chapter I discuss how the emergence of a physically black Christ in the works of artists like Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen can be seen as Significations upon the religion, theology, and songs of the slaves. Like the blues, I argue that the presentation of Jesus as a black lynched victim deconstructively re-signifies and re-contextualizes the sacred/profane structure of Christianity. Moreover, using the lens of Girardian theory, I show how the black lynched Jesus figure of these black artists ultimately subverts the sacrificial system of scapegoating and lynching of postbellum American society. I conclude the chapter by briefly illustrating how the subversive art of the Harlem Renaissance later influenced the Civil Rights Movement and the emergence of liberation theology in the academy.

Finally, in the sixth chapter I analyze the black Jesus figure in the music of Tupac Shakur. I demonstrate how his creation of a “Black Jesuz” who identifies with the “profane” realities of the hood evinces a pastiche of the suffering Jesus figures of the slave songs and Harlem Renaissance—but with a difference. I finish this study by focusing on the emergence of the radical, new sacrilegious Jesus in the (post)modern music of Kanye West. I discuss both how his earlier music can be seen as an artistic pastiche of the suffering Jesus figures of black history and the significance of his radical revision of that suffering Jesus into a liberating figure of decadence and materialistic excess.



## **Chapter 1: The Du Boisian Veil, Double Consciousness, and Gates's Theory of Signifyin(g) As Interpretive Frameworks for African-American Religion**

The interconnected concepts of double consciousness and the veil that W. E. B. Du Bois famously employs in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) to depict the “spiritual strivings” of African Americans arguably remain the most lasting and impactful contribution of his long career as a writer, scholar, sociologist, historian, and activist. In his portrayal of the black American as “an American, a Negro” conflicted with “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings” and “two warring ideals in one dark body,” Du Bois creates a powerful image of the dire socio-cultural, political, and religious realities of African Americans throughout history (10). As Dickson Bruce, Jr. has shown, Du Bois’s construction of double consciousness from “European Romanticism,” “American Transcendentalism,” and the “emerging field of psychology” of his day “would have been familiar to many, if not most, of the educated middle- and upper-class readers of the *Atlantic* [where Du Bois’s essay using the metaphor of double consciousness was first published], one of the foremost popular journals of letters of the day, and should have contributed much to the understanding of Du Bois’s arguments by those readers” (236). In drawing from these wide array of sources, Du Bois consciously crafted a metaphorical concept of literary, medical, psychological, and socio-cultural weight that would immediately register with and be relevant to the readers of his era.

The relevancy that his depiction of the divided African-American identity continues to have in our current world speaks to the timelessness of Du Bois's ability to capture accurately and provocatively the problem of race relations—the “color-line”—at the heart of American society since its inception. As he notes in the opening chapter of *Souls*: “The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (11). Indeed, Du Bois's words have proved to be just as meaningful and prophetic in their significance to the *on-going* history of the African American to this day. To that effect, Arnold Rampersad asserts: “Perhaps no more challenging single statement about the nature of the black American mind, about the psychological consequences of slavery and racism, has ever been offered” (306).

What remains so applicable about Du Bois's conceptions of double consciousness and the veil to the past, present, and future of the lives of African Americans are primarily their inherently fluid nature. That is, in his declared authorial intent to step “within the Veil” and raise it in order to reveal to the reader the matrix of “religion, the passion of human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls” within “its deeper recesses,” Du Bois strategically constructs metaphors incisively poignant in their analysis of African-American lived experiences yet purposefully broad enough to be relevant to whatever new challenges and realities future decades could bring (*Souls* 5). Even within the chapters of *Souls*, Du Bois uses the terms veil and double consciousness with different allusions in mind. Dickson mentions in his essay at least three different uses of double consciousness in Du Bois's work, and Carole Lynn, as quoted in the previous chapter, delineates five different possible readings of the veil (Dickson 238; Lynn 233). Nevertheless, because of the inherent

flexibility of these concepts, some have criticized them for their supposed failure to accurately depict the problem of race relations and their lack of viable solutions to the problems they expose. Ernest Allen, Jr., for example, has criticized Du Bois for his description of the African American's "(unspecified) double thoughts, (equally unspecified) double strivings, (vaguely defined) double aims, and (comparatively well articulated) double ideals" in *Souls* (26). However, what Allen fails to realize is the strategic potentiality made available in Du Bois's construction of double consciousness and the veil: it is *because* of the fluidity of these metaphors that they have proven to be so powerful and contextually relevant from one generation of African Americans to the next. Each metaphor captures uniquely and poignantly the race relations of blacks and whites from the initial clash of cultures between the two in slavery to the world we live in now. As a "hermeneutic" that exemplifies "the ways that diasporan blacks have made a potential affliction into a resource," the concept of double consciousness carries with it trans-historical potentiality for resistance (Beckford 114). Likewise, Du Bois knowingly seems to imply the trans-historical relevancy of the "Veil of Color" as well in his description of it: "The worlds within and without the Veil of Color are changing, and changing rapidly, but not at the same rate, not in the same way; and this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment" (127). Though the white and black worlds on both sides of the Veil of Color may be "changing, and changing rapidly," what remains throughout the progression of history is the (metaphor of the) Veil itself and its relevancy for past and future generations of African Americans (127).

Moreover, the medium through which Du Bois attempts to capture the divided black identity throughout American history is that of African-American religion. The constant

mainstay in the lives of African Americans from the time of slavery, African-American religion—namely, Christianity—provides Du Bois with a framework in which to trace the strifes and agonies of the black American existence to its beginnings in antebellum slavery and, furthermore, to highlight the residual or remaining effects of slavery on post-Emancipation black life. As the title of his most famous work indicates, it is in the *souls* of black folk—their *spiritual* or religious strivings in the “spiritual world”—that Du Bois finds the crux of the African-American struggle to “attain self-conscious manhood” and “merge his double self into a better and truer self” (5, 11). Hence, Rampersad writes: “Times change and the nature and mount of data change, but the black mind remains more or less constant, for Du Bois sees it as irrevocably linked to its African origins. If that constancy is anywhere observable, it is for Du Bois in black Christian religion, which in the main is a product of slavery” (307).

To grasp fully, then, Du Bois’s intertwined metaphors of double consciousness and the veil, we must interpret its far-reaching, historical significance primarily through the lens of African-American Christianity. Most importantly, it is because of the framework of black religion that these metaphors remain relevant and applicable to the changing realities of African-American existence. They reflect fundamentally the changing, evolving status and function of black religion from the time of slavery to the present day. Thus, while undoubtedly exhibiting political and socio-cultural connotations, the Du Boisian concepts of double consciousness and the veil are formed foremost out of the historical reality of African-American Christianity. As Edward Blum notes: “When *Souls* burst onto the marketplace of American literature, it ran directly against more than seventy years of white supremacist theology and culture” (65). Consequently, the interrelation of these twinned

metaphors in the opening, well-known passage of *Souls* depicts not only the social, cultural, and political crisis of millions of black Americans in relation to white America but also, more fundamentally, the role of religion in forming and reflecting that same crisis of the divided African-American identity: "...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..." (10). As concepts that express the idea of doubling or doubles, the veil and double consciousness each serve to delineate certain boundaries, the veil demarcating the "color-line" between white and black relations and double consciousness portraying the division within the black individual.

When understood through the history and symbolic figures of African-American Christianity, the "Veil of Race" and double consciousness also come to express notions of the sacred and profane within their delineations of race relations and the divided black identity. Evoking the image of the veil or curtain within the tabernacle of the Old Testament sacrificial system that separated the Holy of Holies (God) from mankind (Israel), the Du Boisian Veil of Race not only separates the worlds of whites and blacks—it also imparts sacrosanct meaning to and enacts holy judgment on those worlds as well. The very whiteness and blackness of Americans living on either side of the veil came to represent far more than the ostensible signifiers of ethnic difference. More significantly, the physical and metaphysical/metaphorical signifiers of whiteness and blackness became inextricably tied to the sacred and profane structure and symbolism of Christianity so that by "the middle of the nineteenth century, a clear racialized religious worldview had developed, a worldview that

endeavoured with theology, biblical criticism, and scientific findings to dissociate blackness and godliness and to link whiteness with the sacred” (Blum 68).

In privileging the world of blacks over the racism and hatred of the world of whites, Du Bois’s employment of the biblical imagery of the veil appropriates the Old Testament demarcation of the holy (God) and profane (humanity) in a manner that marks the blackness of African Americans as sacred and the whiteness of Anglo-Americans as profane.

As Blum avers: “In all of the cases in which Du Bois referenced the veil, he always had African Americans cloaked behind it, and, in this way, he may have signified that people of color were the “holy of holies” in the United States....who must be hidden because of their access to God” (80). Such a strategic move speaks to Du Bois’s awareness of the history of white appropriation of Christianity to justify the dehumanization and enslavement of Africans and, ingeniously, his consequent reappropriation of the symbolisms of Christianity as a means to combat religious racism.

Accordingly, the double consciousness of the African-American identity likewise represents a division foremost of the *religious* identity of black Americans. Similar to the historical weight behind Du Bois’s employment of the biblical Veil of Race, the division of the African-American life and worldview into conflicting doubles—“an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals”—can only be understood through the initial conflict between white Western Christianity and African-American Christianity at the time of slavery. Despite the manipulative designs of slaveowners to promote the gospel of Christianity to slaves in hopes of appeasing their own consciences and making docile any hint of rebellion in their slaves, it was through the religion of Christianity that enslaved Africans arguably first found ontological meaning and

worth in American society. In converting to the religion of their masters, the slaves did not simply accept the racist ideology implicit in the manipulative brand of Christianity offered to them—they personalized, re-contextualized, and re-signified Christianity in ways that simultaneously met their own needs and resisted against the hegemony of their masters' Christianity. Their Christian identity as African-American slaves, consequently, was centered on a paradox: it was through the (re-appropriated) oppressive religion of white society that black slaves themselves found personal worth and, to varying extents and ways, freedom.

Therefore, as metaphors representing essentially the African-American history of religious thought, the Veil of Race and double consciousness of black identity can be seen as strategies of resistance within the framework of (black) Christianity. As Kahn asserts: "...Double consciousness and Du Bois's great metaphor of the veil represent pragmatist tools for thinking critically about African American existence in light of a relentlessly metastasizing American racism" (29). In their relevancy from the origins of African-American religious history to our current times, these Du Boisian concepts provide us with a hermeneutic or interpretative tools by which we can chart the development and evolution of African-American religious thought and analyze its manifestations throughout the contextual eras of black history. In their definitions or conceptualizations of the nature of religion, the Veil of Race and double consciousness of black religious identity provide us with a multi-faceted look into both the *functionalist/culturalist* and *sui generis* roles and function of religion within the history of African-American Christianity. While the metaphor of the veil can show us how African Americans have, in their (re)appropriations of white Western Christianity and eventual re-contextualizations of black religion as well, manipulated and deconstructed the sacred/profane structure of Christianity in ways that reflect the porous

boundary between the sacred and profane within the socio-cultural *functions* of religion throughout the historical stages of African-American Christianity, the metaphor of double consciousness conversely proffers insight into how the orthodox, *sui generis* formulations of Christianity's bifurcated realms of the sacred/profane have been used to oppress and dehumanize blacks and, subsequently, how blacks have personalized, rejected, and re-purposed religion in order to find answers to questions of personal worth and ontological meaning that are central to *sui generis* conceptions of religion.

These opposing definitions of religion that the Du Boisian metaphors of the veil and double consciousness entail are indicative of the scholarly debates concerning Du Bois's own changing attitude towards and relationship with religion in his life. As briefly covered in the introduction, most scholarship on Du Bois and religion inevitably engages in Joycean-like arguments concerning the role of religion in his personal life. Though academically there is no question that "the sociological study of black American religion begins with the work of Du Bois," scholars have differed greatly on whether or not Du Bois himself retained any semblance of a Christian "faith" or belief system near the end of his life when he "openly lauded Soviet atheism" (Zuckerman, "Introduction" 13; "The Irreligiosity" 6). Phil Zuckerman, for example, posits the atheistic tendencies of the field of sociology and the bitterness from the hypocrisy of white Christianity as major possible influences for Du Bois's declining faith ("The Irreligiosity" 3-17). When questioned directly concerning his religious beliefs, Du Bois himself generally gave somewhat veiled answers concerning his beliefs in the supernatural. He wrote in 1948 in an oft-quoted response to a priest asking him about his (Christian) faith:



If by being “a believer in God,” you mean a belief in a person of vast power who consciously rules the universe for the good of mankind, I answer No; I cannot disprove this assumption, but I certainly see no proof to sustain such a belief, neither in History nor in my personal experience...If on the other hand you mean by “God” a vague Force which, in some uncomprehensible way, dominates all life and change, then I answer, Yes: I recognize such a Force, and if you wish to call it God, I do not object. (qtd. in Zuckerman, “The Irreligiosity,” 8)

Unsurprisingly, then, most biographers and scholars have generally portrayed Du Bois as a full-blown atheist who rejected and derided the Christian religion in entirety.

It was not until recent scholarship—most notably Edward J. Blum’s *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (2007)—that the religious significance of Du Bois’s works have been (re)considered and appreciated for its strategic depth and complexity. Before then, most “historians assert[ed] that Du Bois was not a Christian, that he merely used religious language for rhetorical effect, and that he was just too smart to believe in God or angels or devils” (Blum 9). However, in his study of the historical religious context and debates of the pre- and post-Emancipation eras, Blum emphatically argues for a revisiting of Du Bois’s writing as authentically and functionally religious:

Taken together, Du Bois’s many and varied works—his autobiographies; his historical and sociological studies; his prayers, poems, short stories, and novels; his speeches and lectures; and his personal letters, reflections, and unpublished musings—show that he was one of America’s most profound religious thinkers. His perspectives on religion (and not just black religion), his efforts to craft new approaches to the spiritual, and his sacred opposition to racism, materialism,

and war offer new windows to witness the power of faith in American society and culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (7)

In exploring the ways Du Bois pointedly and specifically responded to the racist employments of Christianity in his time—such as in his constructions of the metaphors of the veil and double consciousness—Blum demonstrates how “*Souls* was a literary act not only of theological and cultural defiance but also of religious creation” (96).

Since Blum’s study, scholars like Jonathan Kahn and Stephanie Shaw have published works further exploring the undoubtedly religious threads present in much of Du Bois’s writings. In *Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (2009), Kahn argues that the “activity of Du Bois’s religious imagination—his invocations of biblical language, his depictions of a black Christ, his prayers and jeremiads, and his repeated return to slave spirituals as a form of spiritual renewal—needs to be understood as a lifelong effort to imagine, fashion, and embody a reverent faith or a new religious ideal” (7). In *W. E. B. Du Bois and The Souls of Black Folk* (2013), Shaw contributes to the new, on-going discussions on the religiosity of Du Bois’s works by arguing for its place as “a complete work of philosophy” amongst the history of other great philosophers like Hegel and Kant (3). What all these works of scholarship speak to are the varied uses and conceptualizations of religion in Du Bois’s works. The tension in the debates on Du Bois’s “purposefully elusive” personal relationship to religion and its unavoidable presence in his writings are exemplified in his employment of the metaphors of the veil and double consciousness and their multi-faceted approaches to and conceptualizations of African-American religion (Blum 7). Taken together, each metaphor, as I have argued, provides us with different, opposing ways to analyze the history of black religion. They allow us to study the role and function of

Christianity for African Americans without the limitations of adhering to just one, totalizing conception of religion. As Kahn thoughtfully notes in his depiction of Du Bois as an “African American pragmatic religious naturalist,” Du Bois’s writings ultimately exemplify how “the boundary between the secular and religious has long been permeable, flexible, and dynamic” (17). He goes on to assert:

The very nature of Du Bois’s religion—an unsystematic, improvisational, borrowing from religious contexts while both skeptical and critical of those very same contexts—speaks to the dynamic nature of African American and American religion...Du Bois is an overlooked example of this unsteady dynamic [between the realms of the sacred and profane], and part of the fruits of puzzling over the religious Du Bois is his emergence as a rich and overlooked example of the intertwined complexities of the religious and the secular in American culture.

(17)

In that regard, whether Du Bois himself ultimately rejected Christianity or not does not negate the insightful contributions of his work into the past, present, and future of African-American religion. And, as many scholars have stressed, the actual reception of *Souls* by the African-American community (like the prominent poet Langston Hughes) as a sacred text problematizes further the supposed atheistic sentiments of Du Bois.

Accordingly, in this study I have chosen the person of Jesus as the focal point in which to explore the development of African-American Christianity from its birth in slavery to its current re-imaginings in the music of Kanye West today. As his name ostensibly suggests, Jesus Christ functions theologically, doctrinally, and socio-culturally as the center and catalyst of the Christian religion. Though various Christian denominations or sects may differ

in their conceptions of him—whether it be concerning his divinity or redemptive acts—Jesus nevertheless is *the* most important figure of the entire systematic structure of Christianity.

Kathryn Tanner writes:

Not all Christian theologies are overtly christocentric; they do not all make Jesus Christ the focal point for their exposition of theological topics. But Jesus Christ is arguably the centerpiece of every Christian theology in so far as beliefs in and about him mark with special clarity the distinctiveness of a Christian religious perspective and have an impact, whether it is a matter for explicit theology notice or not, on an exceptionally wide range of other issues. (245)

Moreover, as “the centerpiece of every Christian theology,” the specific theological, doctrinal, and biblical details of Jesus have been employed both for oppression and freedom throughout Western history. His salvific and redemptive functions (his death on the cross, burial, and resurrection from the grave), his inherently egalitarian messages throughout the gospels, and his mediating role between humanity and God have all been appropriated and re-appropriated in US history both by the dominant class seeking to make sacrosanct their own race and ideology or the oppressed class responding to those hegemonic employments of Christ’s theological and biblical roles. As Linda Woodhead implies, it is the very nature of Christ Himself that makes possible these various appropriations of Him: “Despite the strenuous attempts that have continually been made to contain him [Jesus] within a single interpretative framework, he always threatens to break free...Some of this elusiveness may be traced back to Jesus himself” (6). Therefore, despite the slaveowners’ attempts to enforce an oppressive, docile-making version of Christianity upon the slaves, African Americans from the outset of their religious (albeit divided) identity have taken advantage of this

inherent “elusiveness” and rebellious potentiality within the person of Jesus to resist against the hegemony of white Christianity. And as generations passed, African Americans would continue to find in the figurehead of Christianity a creative resource for resistance and a theological outlet for their frustrations and struggles.

In applying the Du Boisian metaphors of the veil and double consciousness to the representations of Jesus throughout black history, then, we can study how African-American Christianity has evolved over the centuries in its response to the racism and oppression of the given era. The physical body and theological status of Jesus served historically as sites of conflict between the worlds of whites and blacks. The way “Americans imagined and depicted Jesus Christ’s body, skin tone, eye color, brow shape, and hairstyle” has determined to a large degree the very social constructions of race itself (Blum and Harvey 7). In response to how Jesus’s “holy whiteness [was] used to sanctify racial hierarchies,” African Americans (re)appropriated the physical and metaphysical body of Jesus to redeem the physical and metaphysical constructions of their own race (8). Consequently, each progressive representation of Jesus within the historical stages of African-American religious thought embody and encapsulate powerfully the struggle of blacks to re-imagine their religious origins in ways to confront systematic and institutional racism of their society. The various manifestations and re-imaginings of Jesus in black religious thought illustrate both the “color-line” of the Du Boisian veil and the paradoxical double consciousness inherent within the origins and continued development of African-American religious identity. The slaves’ identification with the same Massa Jesus that their owners claimed as divinely justifying the slave-master relationship re-signified the sacred and profane significations previously attached to the metaphysical/metaphorical conceptions of blackness and whiteness. Within

their own identities as black enslaved Christians, their relationship with Jesus as their “bosom friend” provided them with an ontological status amidst the cultural destruction and social death they endured from their displacement from Africa and the Middle Passage to American slavery. Thus in tandem, the Du Boisian veil and double consciousness provide us with interpretative frameworks in which to explore how the person of Jesus operates throughout the history black religious thought as a site of resistance and personal, ontological validation.

Moreover, after the end of slavery, the transformations that the figure of Jesus underwent from Reconstruction to the (post)modern day music of Kanye West reflects the re-contextualizations of Christianity within black religious thought in response to the socio-cultural and political contexts of the specific era. The metaphysical and theological battles the slaves fought over the status and function of Jesus within Christianity became over time battles over the physical complexion of Jesus as well. It was not enough anymore that Jesus identified relationally with and acted salvifically for African Americans—he had to become *physically* and *visually* like them as well. Thus, artists from the Harlem Renaissance and eventually liberation theologians asserted the black identity of Jesus Christ in efforts to redeem in addition to the metaphysical connotations of blackness the *physical* blackness of African Americans. Furthermore, in their creations of a physically black Jesus, they fundamentally reconfigured the slaves’ relationship *with* Jesus by identifying themselves Jesus. Such a turn marks a radical departure from the slaves’ relationship with Jesus and evinces an evolution of the Du Boisian double consciousness of the black religious identity. As I discuss later in this study, Du Bois himself, living in the post-Emancipation terror of lynching and violent acts of racism, engages throughout his writings in the fight over Christ’s

physical body and theological status against the hegemonic white appropriations by white supremacist theology.

Perhaps even more fascinatingly, this Black Jesus was further re-imagined in the 1990s “gangsta” rap music of Tupac Shakur into a Black *Jesuz* who identified with African Americans not only in physical appearance but also in morally questionable ways that reflected the harsh socio-cultural and economic realities of the hood life. Tupac’s “thug” Jesus—a Jesus that was emblematic of the music and culture of that specific hip-hop generation—signaled a new development in relation to the Du Boisian constructs of the veil and double consciousness: the sacred and profane symbolisms attached to the physical and metaphysical constructions of whiteness and blackness (of *race* itself) were re-contextualized to account for the profane realities of gang violence and the drug trade. In response to the bleak conditions of late 1990s urban life for many African Americans, Tupac and other rappers challenged the very sacrosanct nature of Jesus himself by re-signifying what it meant previously to identify with the figure of a suffering (Black) Jesus. Whereas the person of Jesus served for slaves and the generations afterwards as a site of contestation over the sacred and profane significations of the “color-line”—the metaphysical and physical dimensions of blackness and whiteness—the “gangsta” Black *Jesuz* signified a fusion of the sacred and profane that deconstructed the nature of Jesus and, by extension, Christianity as a system. The theological status and physical body of Jesus were no longer re-appropriated from institutional white Western Christianity in counter-hegemonic moves to imbue sacred meaning to figurative or literal blackness; rather, the sacred nature of Jesus himself was re-imagined in ways that challenged the very notions of the sacred and profane within the bifurcated sacrosanct structure of Christianity. That is, in the Black *Jesuz* of Tupac Shakur,

the “blackness” that was made sacred was the “profane” realities of gangs, drugs, and violence. What resulted, consequently, was a deconstruction of the sacred/profane signifiers of Christianity reminiscent of the blues’ fusion of the sexually immoral with the sacred.

In relation to the Du Boisian double consciousness of the African-American religious identity, Tupac’s Black Jesuz continues the transition of artists in the Harlem Renaissance from an identification *with* a suffering Jesus (exemplified in the religion of the slaves) to an identification *as* a Jesus figure. In addition to desiring a Black Jesuz who can identify with the “profane” realities of the ghettos, Tupac imagines himself as a Christ figure who embodies the re-significations of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity. This conflation of the sacred and the profane in Tupac’s identification *as* Black Jesuz can be seen as a continuation of the radicalized doubling or division of the African-American religious identity begun in the black lynched Jesus figures of the 1920s. Just as African-American artists like Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes re-contextualized the slaves’ paradoxical relationship to the religion of their masters by further exposing the problems and hypocrisy of a physically white Jesus through their dramatic presentations of *black* lynched victims as Christ figures, Tupac as Black Jesuz evinces a modern continuation of the Du Boisian double consciousness of the black religious identity.

Finally, in the music of Kanye West the person of Jesus Christ becomes transformed into a sacrilegious figure of materialistic excess and sexual promiscuity. Remarkably, the entire history of black religious thought as seen in the evolution of Jesus can be traced, for the most part, throughout the catalogue of West’s music. From his debut album *The College Dropout* to his latest *Yeezus*, West embarks artistically on a journey starting at the suffering (Black) Jesus of the slaves/Harlem Renaissance/liberation theology and continuing to the



“gangsta” Black Jesus of Tupac Shakur before creating, in his latest protest album *Yeezus*, a further transformation of the received Jesus figures of African-American religious history. In a manner hearkening to the blues’ deconstructive fusion of the sacred/sexual and Tupac’s similar conflation later of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity, West’s conception of Jesus entails a collapsing of Christianity’s bifurcated realms of the sacred and profane. Whereas Tupac’s conflation of the sacred character of Jesus with the profane character of the “gangsta” served to highlight the brutal realities of the late 1990s urban society for African Americans, West’s fusion of the sacrosanct nature of Jesus with the profane excesses of materialism and wantonness highlights the neo-slavery of capitalism/commercialism and institutional incarceration. Yet as this last sentence suggests, West’s (post)modern continuation of the Du Boisian double consciousness of black religious identity is fundamentally marked by an unavoidable contradiction: in his identification *as* this sacrilegious Jesus/Yeezus, West perpetuates himself the enslaving systems of commercialism he cries against. Nevertheless, as I explore later, it is that contradiction that chiefly characterizes West’s (post)modern revolution of the divided religious identity and his re-imagination of the various manifestations of Jesus throughout the history of black religious thought.

Consequently, what becomes clear when charting the trajectory of these various representations of Jesus through the interpretative frameworks of the Du Boisian veil and double consciousness are the creative and artistic acts of repetition and revision that occur from one portrayal of Jesus to the next. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. convincingly argues in his landmark study of the African-American literary tradition *The Signifying Monkey*, the artistic history of African Americans—whether music, literature, or other forms of art—is primarily

distinguishable by the Signifyin(g) process which occurs amongst/between black artists. In receiving the literary or musical tradition, African-American artists Signify upon their artistic forbears (or even contemporaries) in acts of revision and repetition, parody and pastiche. They not only continue the significant tropes or themes handed down to them—they re-create and re-imagine them in ways that creates an artistic space for themselves and re-contextualizes the trope or theme in question to reflect the changing realities of their era. As Gates avers, “black writers, both explicitly and implicitly, turn to the vernacular in various formal ways to inform their creation of written fictions” (*The Signifying Monkey* xxi).

Therefore, in this study’s exploration of Kanye West’s Signification upon the tradition of (Black) Jesus in his music, it is necessary to trace the antecedents and progenitors of the various manifestations of Jesus throughout the history of African-American religious thought in order understand the complex matrix of religion, race, and resistance within West’s specific, (post)modern revision of *the* central character of Christianity. To do otherwise would be to mistakenly treat his radical Jesus figure as an autonomous product devoid of any historical influences. The evolution of the figure of Jesus from the religion of the slaves to the music of Kanye West can be studied, then, as Signifyin(g) acts of revision and repetition—acts of parody and pastiche, as Gates delineates—which foregrounds the history of African-American Christianity and its changing nature and function from one era to the next.

In that sense, we can interpret the blues’ re-significations of the sacred and profane structure of Christianity in its fusion of the sexual and sacred as a Signification upon the slaves’ religion, a post-Emancipation parody of the ontological and socio-cultural function of the Christianity of an earlier era when African Americans paradoxically re-appropriated the

religion of their masters to find personal worth and meaning in life. Similarly, the artists of the Harlem Renaissance revised the Jesus of the slaves' religion in their re-signification of the constructs of whiteness and blackness central to the slaves' conflict over the body of Jesus: whereas the slaves re-signified the sacred/profane symbolism attached to metaphysical/metaphorical conceptions of whiteness and blackness, the artists of the Harlem Renaissance fought over the *physical* conceptions of whiteness and blackness in their re-imagining of Jesus's ethnicity. The heritage of these metaphysical and physical constructions of whiteness/blackness and race in the religion of the slaves to the Harlem Renaissance formed to a large degree the status and role of religion in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the liberation theology of the academy in the 1980s. It is not hyperbolic to state that the Christianity of Martin Luther King, Jr. could be seen as a reinforcement of the hopeful, generally non-violent resistance of the slaves' religion (to that point, the slave songs played a significant role in the campaigns of King) whereas Malcolm X heralded the importance of the ethnically black Jesus of the Harlem Renaissance and the potentiality of aggressive activism in that figure. Likewise, the liberation theology of thinkers like James Cone and Albert Cleage brought the conflicts over the metaphysical and physical (black) nature of Jesus into the academic sphere. Both strove to construct systematically a theology that defined Jesus as a metaphysically and physically black liberator of the African-American community. In Tupac's *Black Jesus*, moreover, there is a revision of the liberating figure of Black Jesus that creates an artistic space for the profane contextual realities of the late 1990s urban life. His creation of a gangsta Jesus who not only identifies with the sufferings of black people but also partakes in and authenticates the gang violence and drug trade of the hood

life Signifies upon and shares key features with the suffering (black) Jesus of times past yet with important fundamental differences.

Thus, Kanye West's creation of a sacrilegious Jesus figure of decadent excesses inherently reflects and contributes to a historical and artistic lineage of suffering, resistance, and reinvention. As I discuss by the end of this study, the catalogue of West's albums, from *The College Dropout* to *Yeezus*, exhibits to a remarkable extent the evolution of Jesus briefly charted to this point. The Jesus in West's first single "Jesus Walks" from his first major album can be seen as a recalling of the various manifestations of the suffering (black) Jesus throughout the history of black religious thought, a Signifyin(g) act of pastiche that strategically amalgamates all the prior forms of Jesus into one powerful song. This conception of Jesus reappears periodically in his albums after *The College Dropout*. Yet in his most recent album *Yeezus*, the prominent figure of Yeezus/Jesus departs from the more traditional suffering (black) Jesus of his earlier music. In that regard, West's new re-imagining of Jesus into a sacrilegious figure of materialism and promiscuity is a fascinating turn of events, a Signifyin(g) act of radical revision upon his earlier work and its pastiche of the suffering Jesus of the black religious tradition.

To unearth the significance of the evolution of Jesus within West's catalogue of albums, then, we must first study and trace the evolutionary pattern of Jesus throughout the history of black religious thought as represented in the chronology of African-American music, literature, and religion. In doing so, we discover by extension how the Du Boisian metaphors of the veil and double consciousness, as embodied within the person of Jesus, serve as dual lenses into the birth, nature, and development of the divided African-American religious identity. Thus, when applied together, Gates's literary theory of Signifyin(g) and

the Du Boisian metaphors of the veil and double consciousness work as unique interpretative frameworks that complement each other in the windows they provide us into the historical matrix of race, religion, theology, and resistance that is African-American Christianity.

To that effect, we must begin our study of the (post)modern religiosity of Kanye West—as illustrated in his creation of a sacrilegious Jesus figure—in the religion of the slaves. It is in the birth of the divided African-American religious identity and subsequent re-signification of the sacred and profane Christian symbolism attached to constructions of whiteness and blackness that we can trace the artistic roots of West's early pastiche of the suffering Jesus figure and the significance of his later departure from it. Indeed, before the black artistic revisions of the slaves' religion following Emancipation, the slaves themselves first Signified upon white Western Christianity in their re-appropriation of it from their masters' hegemonic employment. Accordingly, in the next two chapters I establish the birth of the divided black religious identity amidst the degradations of slavery and how black slaves re-appropriated and reclaimed their masters' Christianity for their own resistive purposes. I then turn to what is generally agreed to be the major source of our understanding of the characteristics and content of the slave's religion: the songs or "spirituals" of the slaves. It is within the slaves' music that can study their Signification upon white and biblical Christianity and understand the paradox upon which their divided religious identities were founded upon.

Turning to the slave songs, moreover, reflects the very thematic structure of *The Souls of Black Folk* itself. As many scholars have highlighted, the music of the slaves played an important role in the literary, political, and socio-cultural aims behind Du Bois's writing of *Souls*. His placement of the musical sheet of selected slave songs at the start of each chapter

were more than simple literary flourishes or touches—they were strategically placed epigraphs designed, amongst other reasons, to foreground the music and religion of the slaves as *the* foundation of African-American history and identity. By the time Du Bois published *Souls*, slave songs had become “an important genre” of much discussion amongst white and black scholars alike; in contrast to the “questionable associations” of racism with other black musical genres like ragtime, slave songs “yielded far greater political and psychological advantages than any other musical tradition that African Americans had produced up to that point” (Brooks 273-274). Early collections of the songs by various editors attempted to argue for their musical creativity and value, and Du Bois, in his implementation of them, “follow[ed] [this] collective interests of compilers of spirituals... and commentators... in the trend to elevate the genre” (276). As Christopher Brooks writes, “Du Bois saw the spirituals as a form of art that was counterpoint to the debasement of black expression in theatrical minstrelsy and its caricatures” (275). Thus, along with his desire to elevate the music of the slaves “to the level of high European prose,” their presence in *Souls* was meant by Du Bois to demonstrate “that blacks felt fear and hope and proved that people of color were authentically human and had a special connection to the divine” (Brooks 278; Blum 84). Eric J. Sundquist summarizes:

The spirituals represented Du Bois’s pointed assertion that African American culture could be codified, that it was worthy of preservation, and, whatever the degree of its assimilation by the dominant European American culture, that it spoke identifiably in a language of its own...Hidden within the veil of black life, the music and words of the sorrow songs form a hidden, coded language in *The*

*Souls of Black Folk*, one that recapitulates the original cultural function of the spirituals themselves. (470)

Functionally, then, the slave songs served as a medium for Du Bois to connect his efforts and work to the slavery of the past. To solve the crisis of the Veil of Race (the color-line of race relations) and the double consciousness of African-American identity, therefore, Du Bois searches for answers by confronting their beginnings in the horrors of slavery. Foremost above all, “the representation of slavery was central to the entire task” of *Souls* (Rampersad 301). Such an approach to the issues of race in the early 1900s, as Arnold Rampersad has convincingly illustrated, was in direct contrast to the approach of Booker T. Washington—the other major African-American leader and intellect of that time—to slavery in his very popular *Up From Slavery* published just two years before *Souls* in 1901. Whereas Washington tended to highlight the perceived “benefits gained by blacks through the institution” of slavery in his autobiographical version of the traditional slave narrative, implying in his mantra for blacks to strive towards the educational and work-place opportunities of the future that the evils of slavery were a thing of the past, Du Bois magnified the psychological, socio-cultural trauma of slavery in *Souls* and its continued, lasting effects on the lives of African Americans generations afterwards (298). In that regard, although “Du Bois himself was thirty-five years of age in 1903”—“slavery [having] been officially dead in the United States for forty years”—by framing the parameters and content of his monumental work within the religion and music of the slaves, he strategically addresses the current debates on slavery in his time and empathically exposes the neo-slavery of post-Emancipation America (300). As Rampersad writes:

Du Bois understood clearly that the representation of slavery was central to the entire task. Unlike Washington in *Up From Slavery*, he believed that slavery had been a force of extraordinary—and mainly destructive—potency. Destructive as it had been, however, slavery had not destroyed every major aspect of the African character and psychology (topics on which Washington had been silent); the African core had survived. But so had slavery. Where Washington saw opportunity on every hand for the black, if the right course was followed, Du Bois proclaimed that American slavery was not dead. (301)

Therefore, to begin with the religion and music of the slaves is to acknowledge and pay respect to what Du Bois himself forced America to reckon with in *The Souls of Black Folk*—that being the *spiritual strivings* of African Americans throughout history. In studying the “Sorrow Songs” of the slaves, we discover the birth of a divided identity, marvel at the subsequent battles over the sacred/profane religious symbolisms of the “color-line,” and hear in its sorrowful yet triumphant lyrics the music of a people whose legacy can still be heard in the songs of African-American artists to this day.



## **Chapter 2: The Birth of the Divided African-American Religious Identity**

### **I**

As the complex product of the African-American slave's ingenious ability to create from his West African heritage, the oppression of chattel slavery, and the re-appropriated Christianity of their masters, the slave songs cannot be studied apart from the sum of its inextricable parts. Each facet of the slave's music of sorrow and triumph plays an essential role in the aesthetic, political, socio-cultural, literary, and religious power of the songs. Studying the central figure of Christ in the slave songs, then, is in part an exercise in untangling the various historical threads which formulate the context of his presence in them. If analyzed in isolation from its intricate origins, the Jesus of the slaves' religion and music can ostensibly appear as merely a manipulative tool of white American society employed to keep slaves focused on other-worldly fantasies and thereby docile and submissive to the grim realities of slavery. Interpreted in that manner, the slaves' "Massa Jesus" bears no difference from the Jesus of their earthly, white masters and owners. Such a view of the slaves' religion is held by many scholars who deem the slaves' appropriation of Christianity as a systematic acculturation to the institution and ideology of slavery. To these scholars, the religion of the slave songs amounts to nothing more than a soporific opium induced by white society, a false religious consciousness instated in slaves designed to maintain the status quo. Du Bois himself often wrote critically of the slaves' appropriation of their masters' Christianity,

writing in *Souls* that “Nothing suited his condition then better than the doctrines of passive submission embodied in the newly learned Christianity (157).

However, when seen within the network of the socio-cultural, political, and religious realities of its time, the slave songs come to represent the enslaved African Americans’ strategic reappropriation of white hegemonic Christianity and their consequent proclamation of ontological and personal worth and meaning through it. Rather than simply assimilating and appropriating the religion of their masters, the slaves *re*-appropriated the egalitarian and liberative potentialities inherent within biblical Christianity from the racist designs of white society; in doing so, they re-signified and re-contextualized Christianity in strategic ways that fought against the accumulative history of prejudice assigned to physical and metaphysical notions of blackness and the socio-cultural, economic, political, and scientific constructions of race and justifications of slavery in antebellum America. Though their religious identity was centered on the unavoidable paradox of assuming a religion initially employed to sanctify and perpetuate their enslavement and debasement, African-American slaves found an instrument of resistance and an unending resource of self-validation by Signifyin(g) upon on both white Christianity and, perhaps more notably, the non-manipulated Christianity of the Bible itself. It is because of the uncontainable, egalitarian nature of Christianity that the slaves were able to discover ontological meaning and personal worth in what was previously the hegemonic religion of their masters. That is, in their exploration of and identification with the characters, principles, and theology of biblical (Protestant) Christianity, the slaves in turn contradicted their white owners’ hegemonic interpretations of Scriptures. Signifyin(g) upon Biblical events like the Old Testament exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage and the New Testament birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the slaves reclaimed

the powerful potentiality within Christianity from white society's oppressive employment of it. In that sense, the double consciousness or division of the antebellum slaves' religious identity expressed itself in both paradoxical, duplicitous (white versus black) formulations of their religion and in their Signification upon biblical Christianity in opposition to white oppressive interpretations.

Of the many biblical figures—Old and New Testament—prevalent in the music of the slaves, Jesus by far is the central character and focus throughout them all. Ostensibly, the life of Jesus offered “many parallels to the experience of slavery: A child of God, born of humble origins, forced with his parents to flee from oppressors, eventually captured, persecuted, tortured, and killed” (A. Jones 8). Drawing upon the soteriological, prophetic, and kingly offices and roles of Jesus in the Bible, the slaves embraced a Jesus reimagined from the religion of their oppressors and created songs that expressed those re-significations and re-contextualizations of white hegemonic Christianity. Signifyin(g) upon all the metaphorical potentiality within the biblical Jesus, the slaves found in him a compassionate saviour who suffered and died for them, a friend who proffered them companionship and personal worth, a king who created for them socio-cultural and political avenues for certain freedoms and who would one day bring judgment against the wicked, and—perhaps most of all—a “massa” who provided them with a life and identity apart from the social death they endured and liminal status they occupied under their earthly masters. The presence and function of Jesus in the slave songs and religion, therefore, challenged the Jesus of white Christianity who sanctioned the institution of slavery and endorsed the brutality and dehumanization of the master-slave relationship. Moreover, these multiple functions of Jesus within the religion and music of the slaves can be seen as distinct historical sites of socio-cultural, political,

racial, and theological conflict. Hence, the grave error in assessing the Jesus of the slaves in isolation of the multi-faceted debates of the era is the myopic interpretations of his various roles in the slaves' religion that occur as a result. Unless we consider the symbolic weight and historical baggage attached to the signifier of blackness, the theological justifications and sanctifications of slavery, the constructions of race through the dehumanization of African Americans, and the social death and liminal status of the slaves in America from the onset of the middle passage, we cannot fully understand the significance of the slaves' religion/music and the centrality of Jesus within it.

Consequently, scholars who dismiss the religion of the slaves and their music as being "other-worldly" at the expense of "this-worldly" lived realities mistakenly bifurcate the two realms of the slaves' religion: much like the porous boundary of the sacred and profane realms within the overall history of African-American religious thought, the spiritual or metaphysical aspects of Jesus's roles and function within the religion of the slaves directly influenced the socio-cultural, political, emotional, and physical facets of their lives. It was through the personal validation and avenues for resistance made possible from the slaves' Signification upon the powerful metaphorical and metaphysical potentialities within the Christianity of their masters that they were able to fight against the objectification and commodification of their bodies from the dehumanizing events of the middle passage, the auction block, and overall life under slave owners. Even after the end of slavery, the religion of the slaves continued to carry dire relevance for the lives of African Americans throughout post-Emancipation neo-slavery, remaining both a source they would still creatively Signify upon and an artistic outlet for their struggles and frustrations they would repeatedly return to. The importance of the birth of the slaves' (divided) religious identity, therefore, and its

lasting heritage for generations of blacks post-Civil War to our world today cannot be overemphasized.

In the songs of the slaves, we have a window into the inception of the double consciousness of the slaves' (religious) identity and Signifyin(g) by which they re-appropriated and reclaimed biblical Christianity from the white society in which they were enslaved. Because of the severe lack of historical documents and sources on the slaves—and the general skepticism we must give to many of the clearly prejudiced accounts of Africans—concrete details of the initial developments of chattel slavery in colonial and antebellum America and the eventual outburst of slave conversion and religion cannot be known absolutely. Of all the data available, from early colonial laws referencing slavery to portrayals of and treatises on African Americans in antebellum (popular) culture, the later emergence of slave narratives, interviews with ex-slaves, and eventual documentation of slave songs provide the most authentically “black” insight or perspective available into the nature and function of the slaves' religion. To that point, the slave songs in particular evince like no other source the content of the slaves' religion and the roles of Jesus within it. Theologically, they might be seen as doctrinal statements in their proclamation of the slaves' religious beliefs in response to the religion of their masters. In structure and performance, they expressed the survival of the slaves' West African ritual heritage of rhythmic and communal music, dance, and spirit possession. And, finally, in the centrality of Jesus within them, they revealed the slaves' response to the socio-cultural, political, and religious conflicts surrounding their creation.

Fundamentally, then, a study of the music of the slaves is to a large extent a study of the history of the slaves' religion and the prior events, prejudices, and sentiments that led to

the enslavement and dehumanization of the African (American) in the first place. Before the first captive slaves from West Africa landed in the American colonies during the early 1600s, native Africans had already been deemed by white Europeans as mentally, physically, and socio-culturally inferior and sub-human. Their skin color, cultural practices, and overall physiognomy were topics of scientific and religious debate that generally concluded with the superiority of white Europeans over the “savage” black Africans. Symbolically, the foreign black body of the African became for the English a diametrically opposed “other” whom they could project their own fears, desires, and insecurities upon. In defining the blackness of the African—as a scientific “oddity,” evidence of the biblical curse of slavery upon Ham, and evidence of their simian, sub-human nature—English society demarcated the parameters of their own whiteness, constructing through the tribal African their conversely “civilized” and “Christian” identity. The dehumanizing processes of colonial and antebellum slavery, consequently, were historically a result of a confluence and convergence of prejudices that formulated during the initial contacts between the white Englishman and the black African. The early link made between the “licentiousness” of apes and Africans (and its supposed directed focus especially towards white women) and the theological rationales given for black enslavement would directly influence the socio-cultural, political, and religious state of blacks throughout the entire history of America. The prevalence of black stereotypes in antebellum popular culture—from the dangerous licentious savage, to the child-like servant, to the Christ-like Uncle Tom figure—is a direct reflection of the racist sentiments towards Africans formulated before the institution of slavery ever began in colonial America. Moreover, the cultural imprints of these racist stereotypes and sentiments survived post-Emancipation and are still with us today.

Thus, in exploring the person of Jesus within the slave songs, we witness this convergence of cultures, religions, and worldviews that occurred at first contact between the worlds of blacks and whites. It is truly one of history's greatest ironies that one of the first two English ships to transport Africans as cargo to the New World was named *Jesus*, for it was through the potentiality of power, resistance, and ontology in the person of Jesus that African Americans would mount their countermovement against centuries of accumulative racist ideologies and sentiments (Blum and Harvey 43).

## II

The rationalizations, prejudices, and conditions that led to the chattel slavery of colonial and antebellum America cannot be reduced to any single underlying cause. Although the ostensible contrastive black skin color of the African to the white Englishman may seem reason enough and the more obvious explanation, literal pigmentation alone does not account for the complete degradation of the enslaved African American. Some early descriptions of the African's appearance by English and Dutch observers only briefly mentioned the color of their skin, focusing more on the stark contrast of their cultural practices to Western civilization. When English settlers first dealt with native Africans in 1631—before their substantial participation in the world slave trade—they did not somehow immediately conflate blackness with slavery. Rather, “Englishmen met Negroes merely as another sort of men” (Jordan 3) Furthermore, there may have even been hints of aesthetic admiration by some Europeans for the African's blackness and physical traits, despite the “ideal of beauty” generally accepted by the 1600s that categorically vaunted the (white) Greek body as the pinnacle of race perfection and, by comparison, ranked the “dark-skinned” African as “inferior” (*Terror and Triumph* 3, 10-11). It could also be argued that the skin

tone of West Africans may not have been too far removed from the pigment of certain Europeans of warmer climates, such as Latins. And finally, the frequency of miscegenation in American slavery would eventually problematize to some extent the drastic color differences between master and slave, with the occasional mulatto offspring being lighter in tone than their European counterpart (Patterson 128).

Therefore, it was not solely the literal appearance of the African's blackness that drove the English to dehumanize and enslave him; rather, it was the myriad of socio-cultural, religious, and (pseudo)scientific significations that his blackness came to represent which eventuated in his status as sub-human chattel. As Winthrop Jordan has thoroughly explored in his landmark study *White Over Black* (1968), the significance of English society's early fixation on the blackness of Africans was the interconnected web of metaphysical and religious symbolism, scientific and anthropological debates, and socio-cultural ostracization it entailed. The convergence of all these factors—as the debates of the New Negro movement would reflect centuries later—amounted to the blackness of the African functioning as the site of the construction of race itself. Eventually, to be black meant more than a physical or aesthetic debasement; more importantly, it meant *socio-cultural, political, and religious* inferiority. To understand how the African became an African-American slave, consequently, requires an untangling of the various threads discussed so far.

By the time Englishmen made contact with Africans, the color and idea of blackness had already accumulated various negative connotations in the Elizabethan era. The English “found in the idea of blackness a way of expressing some of their most ingrained values. No other color except white conveyed so much emotional impact” (Jordan 7). In addition to the aesthetic privilege given to white beauty over the black pigment and physical characteristics



of Africans, blackness signified metaphysically/metaphorically conceptions of evil, wickedness, and the demonic. No doubt this was in large part due to the symbolic Christian dichotomies of light and darkness—purity and sin—in English society. A brief look into John Ashton's *The Devil in Britain and America* (1896), a work which purports to provide a “succinct account of demonology and witchcraft in England and America,” serves as a salient example of the religious and metaphysical symbolic power that blackness held in the 17th century and on (v). In “adducing” of “authorities not usually given” and “painstaking research into old cases” (being careful to take “everything from original sources”), Ashton presents a broad overview of the historical depictions of Satan and first-hand accounts of encounters white women supposedly had with the devil himself. While the drawings of devils appear as *black* creatures—sometimes depicted as dragon/bird-like animals, other times as the more traditionally ubiquitous monster with horns and a tail—the most fascinating aspect of Ashton's work are the many purported testimonies of young white women being assaulted by black male demonic figures.

His historical survey of the devil in England and America is rife with the reoccurring Satanic figure of the “Blackeman” who randomly meets women in various locations, sometimes inaugurating them into becoming witches and—most often—attempting to seduce them into licentious acts. As one particular testimony states: “This Examine saith, as she was making of her bedde in her Chamber, there appeared in the shape of a man in blacke cloaths, and blackish cloaths about six weeks past, and bid her good morrow, and shee asked what his name was, and he said his name was Blackeman...” (237). Another women in Ashton's study testifies: “Three Years I have had to do with, and for the Devil: He appeared to me like a Black Man on a Horse upon the Moor; He told me I should never want, if I

would follow his ways: He bid me give myself to him, and forsake the Lord: and I promised him I would” (265). While much could be made of the psychological or emotional states of these young female interviewees (if we are to take them at face value), what becomes clear when reading all the many similar accounts as the two above is the conflation of blackness with the devil, particularly in the form of a man. Hence, when English society suddenly became acquainted with an ethnic group with a skin tone darker than theirs and cultural practices wildly disparate from their “civilized” one, it was perhaps inevitable that these ties between physical/metaphysical blackness and devils (along with all the notions of sin, wickedness, and evil it entailed) would influence their reactions to Africans. Here was a people whose pigmentation happened to be the color which harnessed the most negative metaphorical and spiritual connotations for a white “Christian” society and whose ritualistic practices brought to mind hyperbolic ideas of cannibalism and human sacrifice. Probably in some sense, they may have seemed like the very manifestations of the “Blackeman” of Ashton’s historical research.

The theological justifications that were eventually made for both the blackness of the Africans’ skin and the history of their enslavement from other world countries, therefore, should come at no surprise. If the blackness of Africans brought to the English mind notions of wickedness and sin, then interpreting their pigmentation as a biblical sign of the curse of slavery upon Ham was no far leap in logic. As many scholars and historians have documented, the somewhat bizarre story of Noah and his three sons in the ninth chapter of Genesis was heralded for centuries as theological, biblical proof of and justification for the enslaving of black peoples. Within the seven verses of the chapter, Noah plants a vineyard shortly after the end of the Flood and becomes drunk, lying “uncovered in his tent” (*English*

*Standard Version*, Gen. 9:21). In the key event of the story, Ham, “the father of Canaan,” sees “the nakedness of his father” and tells “his two brothers outside,” whereas Shem and Japheth conversely walk “backward[s] and cover[] the nakedness of their father” with a garment, their faces being “turned backwards” so that they would “not see their father’s nakedness” (Gen. 9:22-23). When Noah awakes from his drunken sleep, he somehow knows “what his youngest son had done to him” (though the passage itself is quite ambiguous as to what this means) and proceeds to curse Ham’s son Canaan and his future progeny: “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers” (Gen. 9:25). As part of this curse, the people of Canaan’s lineage would be servants to the future generations of Shem and Japheth. Though just two verses later Noah’s death is recorded, the horrific impact of his curse upon Canaan in the hands of white society lasted for hundreds of years. Even though the obvious logical fallacies of (mis)applying this passage of scripture to the entire African race was debated and proven wrong by thinkers like Sir Thomas Browne (the “first Englishman to discuss the Negro’s color in great detail”), the “extraordinary persistence of this idea in the face of centuries of incessant refutation was probably sustained by a feeling that blackness could scarcely be anything *but* a curse and by the common need to confirm the facts of nature by specific reference to Scripture” (Jordan 19). Thus, while the biblical passage in question makes no mention of skin color—its very application to the African race being a product of backward reasoning made to justify, after the fact, the slavery of blacks—it proffered English society with *theological* justification for the prejudiced sentiments they already held towards the strange, foreign people.

Even apart from theological and metaphysical debasements of the African’s skin color, his blackness became an overarching signifier for the scientific, anthropological, and socio-

cultural dehumanizations of him as well. Indeed, the physical appearance and practices of the African pervaded practically every aspect of English society: as some debated the long-term effects of warm climate on human pigmentation, others drew connections between the supposed licentiousness of apes to African men and women (Jordan 12-28). Edward Topsell's *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents* (1658), a combination of two of his earlier works published in 1607 and 1608, illustrates quite effectively the historical connection drawn between apes and Africans: "Men that have low and flat Nostrils are Libidinous as Apes that attempt women, and having thick lips, the upper hanging over the neather, they are deemed fools, like the lips of...Apes" (3). Though Topsell may have stopped just short of calling the African an animal, the dehumanizing implications of his statement nevertheless expresses the overwhelming tendency of white society to relegate Africans to sub-human status. Furthermore, coupled together with the African's connection to the rampant sexual behavior of apes was the spiritual/metaphysical link already forged between apes and "Satyres-like" devils (Jordan 30-31). Thus, the relegation of Africans to the lower rung of the Great Chain of Being occupied by apes demonstrated the sheer scaffolding of prejudices in the racist formulations of their blackness. Every racist sentiment society towards Africans reinforced and strengthened the other, becoming even more deeply ingrained within the subconscious of English society.

In that regard, perhaps the most intriguing claim in Winthrop Jordan's classic study is his assertion about how these English prejudices towards Africans ultimately reflected how the foreign black body served as a means for white society both to explore and project their own desires, fears, and insecurities. Because the advent of the Protestant Reformation—with its emphasis on "Biblicism, personal piety, individual judgment, and more intense self-

scrutiny and internalized control”—led many “pious Englishmen” to “approach life as if conducting an examination” and “Scripture as if peering in a mirror,” Jordan argues that “Englishmen...used peoples overseas as social mirrors and...were especially inclined to discover attributes in savages which they found first but could not speak of in themselves” (40). Implied in Jordan’s intriguing analysis, moreover, is the ways in which the foreign black body of the African functioned as a site of the social construction of race itself. In their vastly different cultural practices and (perceived) physical appearances, the “savage” Africans demarcated for English society the parameters of its “civilized” identity. They were a mirror reversal to the Englishman, delineating the dichotomous boundaries between the two: white/black, man/animal, savage/civilized, and—perhaps most historically damning and hypocritical of all—Christian/heathen. To dehumanize the African at all levels of humanity, consequently, was to reinforce those same levels of humanity within the English. And the one obvious signifier that encapsulated the totality of the African’s opposing juxtaposition to the Englishman was his blackness.

By the time slaves had become chattel in colonial America, consequently, their skin color was already an ostensible, easily-identifiable designator of centuries’ worth of prejudice and racism. Although documentation of roughly the first eighty years of slavery in America is unfortunately very scarce, it is nevertheless not too difficult to understand how the African (American) slave quickly attained the status of non-human chattel when considering this history of the multitude of prejudice stacked against him (Jordan 44; *Terror and Triumph* 12-13). The historical, thorough degradation of the African perhaps could only logically manifest itself fully in the paramount dichotomy of master and slavery. In relation to the world at large, Portuguese and Spanish explorers had already captured and sold

thousands of Africans by the end of the fifteenth century, supplying their colonies in the New World with black slaves, so that “the enslavement of Africans was more than a century old” when the first slave landed in Virginia in 1619 (Jordan 56; *Terror and Triumph* 9). As an institution that relegated Africans to a liminal status in society—not fully human, yet not fully a beast—slavery perfectly accommodated the sub-human status of blacks, bringing hundreds of years of accumulated prejudice to its logical, tragic conclusion. Compared to indentured servitude, slavery entailed such a “complete loss of liberty that it seemed to Englishmen somehow akin to loss of humanity” (Jordan 54). Whereas the indentured servant was, relatively speaking, protected by law from complete degradation and could eventually work for his freedom back as a regular member of society, the slave—as a captive stranger—underwent and maintained an irrevocable social death.

As Orlando Patterson has extensively written, the social death of slavery predicated upon the “symbolic control” inherent within the “master-slave relationship” (101). In their “profound natal alienation”—their “isolation” and “strangeness”—slaves were symbolically relegated to a liminal space within society which they occupied paradoxically as both a being and non-being, human and property (102). Violently uprooted physically and socio-culturally from their homeland, slaves were “denuded proto-Americans in search of identity, systematically stripped of their African heritage and effectively and intentionally excluded from American culture and its roots in European modernity” (West 80). The highly monitored and policed lives of slaves on plantations contributed to the liminality of social death. Olli Alho details:

Plantation life itself was apt to prevent the growth of...unity among the slaves as would have been necessary for keeping alive the ethnic tradition and way of life.

Even if slaves with the same background happened to be brought to the same or neighbouring plantations, there were many regulations in slave life that minimized or completely eliminated their opportunity for communicating by traditional means: the use of African languages was discouraged or forbidden, meetings of the slaves were strictly controlled, and social rewards were granted for advancements in the habit of the New World. (48)

It could be argued, then, that before the birth of the divided religious identity of the African-American slave—and the schism of the self that characterized it—the black slave’s initial symbolic relationship to his master and society at large was founded upon the the double consciousness of social death. Living “on the margin between community and chaos, life and death, the sacred and secular,” slaves were forced to formulate their notion of self upon the dichotomous contradictions of liminality (Paterson 117). Denied the language and community of their former lives, they were afforded no concrete, ontological status of their own in colonial America; it was only through the perversely paternalistic relationship with their masters “which created a tendency for the slaves to identify with a particular community through identification with its masters” that they were able to find some form of meaning (Genovese 6).

Certain ritualistic processes and laws, moreover, propagated the dehumanizing transformation of African men and women to New World chattel. Upon their arrival to the colonies, slaves underwent an immediate, drastic induction into their new liminal statuses in white society through the auction block. Anthony Pinn refers to the process by which slave auctions “enforced and celebrated the dehumanization of Africans” as a “ritual of reference,” a “repeated, systematic activity conducted in carefully selected locations that [was] intended

to reinforce the enslaved's status as object" (*Terror and Triumph* 49). The objectification of the black body, the cruel separation of families, and the inhuman humiliation that the auction block mandated all worked to destroy any humanity within the African slaves, essentially prepping them for life as chattel property. Pinn writes:

The intensity of such rituals stems from the symbolic involvement of the enslaved in the process...It is through this ritualizing that the slave's status is given social force and meaning because it makes explicit the re-creation of the slave as a 'thing.' Auctions, as a ritual of reference, are important in that they made explicit through humiliation—and elaborate through display—the nonbeing of the African and the existential superiority of the European. The auction becomes something of a ceremony through which the making of the negro as historical material is accomplished. (49)

Thus, it is in the power of the "symbolic involvement" that the slave auctions resulted in the social death of the slave. The wails of mothers separated from children and the commodification of the naked black body through the eyes of white buyers firmly ingrained in the newly transplanted African their status as "raw material" for sale (*Terror and Triumph* 51).

Because the liminal status of slaves was by nature a dichotomous contradiction—a slave being simultaneously both human and property—"traditional English concepts and legal categories of bondage and servitude" did not "thoroughly comprehend" and account for the unique status of the slave (Jordan 103). As James Cone notes, "Under the law...slaves were property *and* persons. But the two definitions together were absurd. The concept of property negated the idea of personhood" (*The Spirituals and the Blues* 21). Consequently,



the infamous slave codes were created to regulate the master-slave relationship and ensure the complete degradation of the slave. Most importantly, as Jordan emphasizes, the slave codes fundamentally “told the white man, not the Negro, what he must do:” acting as “public dialogues among masters and among white men generally,” they were “intended to confirm their sense of mastery over their Negro slaves—and over themselves” (108-109). In the slave codes, therefore, the symbolic control central to the master-slave relationship found legal expression. The drastic, ironically savage punishments and dictatorial policing that white owners were by law commanded to enforce guaranteed and perpetuated the social death of their slaves inaugurated by the ritual of the auction block.

In addition to these ritualistic systems and laws designed and implemented to perpetuate the symbolic, ontological destruction of the slave, the most prominent ideological tool eventually employed by owners to maintain the master-slave relationship was religion—namely, Christianity. Promising the placation of the inhuman labor and cruelty of slavery through a redirection of the slaves’ attention to future, “other-worldly” comforts, Christianity offered white society a seemingly perfect means of maintaining forever the institution of slavery: it was no longer just white men and women that sanctioned and regulated slavery but God Himself. Such a divine justification of slavery—hearkening back to the historical ways the Old Testament story of Noah and Ham was used, in effect, to curse African blackness—added *eternal* value to the institution of slavery and, by extension, constructions of whiteness and blackness. It was a perverted twist and reversal of the biblical question, “If God is for us, who can be against us?”, with blacks becoming eternally destined to a life of slavery (Rom. 8:31).

Nevertheless, before propagating a hegemonic version of Christianity to their slaves, white owners were at first reluctant to do so. Besides the initial “antipathy of the colonists themselves,” the potential impact of religion upon the “economic profitability” of slaves deterred owners from converting their slaves (*Slave Religion* 98). “[T]ime-consuming” duties such as “church-going” would have “run counter to the general habit of working slaves on Sundays” (Alho 50). More significantly, however, was the fear of slaveowners that the process of conversion and baptism would, by law, emancipate their slaves. Hence, because “the Christian commission to preach the gospel to all nations ran directly counter to the economic interest of the Christian slave owner,” most forbade missionaries from catechizing their slaves (*Slave Religion* 98). Alho states concerning the dilemma of “Christian” slave owners: “Conscientious slaveholders had thus a specific problem to face: whether to allow their slaves to be baptized and thus give up their property, or whether to act against Christian principles by keeping the Africans both heathen and enslaved” (Alho 49). Along with being a primary example of the hypocrisy of white Christianity, the reluctance of slaveowners in converting their slaves showed their recognition of the dangerous and destructive potentiality within Christianity. The thought of allowing their slaves to become Christians brought the untenable prospect of the disruption of the balance of symbolic power inherent within the master-slave relationship and, by consequence, the dissolution of the institution of slavery itself.

On a more fundamental, socio-cultural level, the idea of a Christian black slave also questioned the construction of white English/American identity in contradistinction to the sub-human, “heathen” African. Just as the blackness of Africans (and all the racist theological, scientific, and cultural sentiments it signified) served for English society as a

means to demarcate the parameters of their own whiteness and identity, slaves likewise became a counter-image for white society in colonial America. Their perceived savagery was a “vivid reminder of the dangers facing transplanted Europeans, the living embodiment of what they must never allow themselves to become” (Jordan 110). Furthermore, after the American Revolution, the turmoil of the birth of the white American identity from its English roots continued to be reflected in the subjugation and portrayals of African Americans. As Cornel West implies, in one sense the double consciousness of African-American identity was mirrored and exacerbated by the double consciousness of white American identity: “Africans in the United States confronted a dominant Protestant European population whose own self-identity suffered from an anxiety-ridden provinciality. The black American struggle for self-identity has always contributed constructively to the American struggle for self-identity, though the latter has only exacerbated and complicated it in return” (81). Accordingly, white “American artists and writers strove consciously to establish an autonomous national culture no longer dependent on that of Europe”—seeking to “sing [their] own songs, write [their] own poems, novels, and philosophy” (83). They looked for answers “deep down within [themselves] without using the lens of the parent civilization to do so” (83).

In the literature and popular culture of the era, therefore, we can see the dynamic tension between the double consciousnesses of the African/American identity and the English/American identity. As scholars and writers like Tony Morrison have explored in *Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), the stories of authors like Edgar Allan Poe and Herman Melville, though perhaps not always explicitly containing black characters, nevertheless express either in their absence or symbolic substitution of African-American

characters the creation and reinforcement of (white) American identity. Thus, in Poe's "The Murders of the Rue Morgue," the gruesome murder of two wealthy white women by a savage orangutan which has been taken captive from its homeland and constrained/enslaved in America illustrates the psychological fear white society had at the thought of rampant slaves. By dramatizing the imagined savage potential within African Americans through an animal with superhuman strength and a blood-thirsty ferocity, Poe—whether consciously or not—reinforces the dichotomous foundation of civilized/savage upon which white Americans constructed their own identities. Therefore, in their literary attempt to resolve their own double consciousness by creating a uniquely American canon separate from English influence, white American authors reified and perpetuated in their writing the double consciousness of African Americans (African/American, human/animal). The relationship between the two identities, then, is inversely proportional: whereas white Americans gradually gained more independence from the constraints of looking at themselves through the lens of their English origins, black Americans continued to be denied an identity of their own or any semblance of humanity.

To that effect, a brief overview of the evolution of black stereotypes throughout the antebellum period further illustrates the dependency of the white American identity upon racist conceptions/constructions of African Americans. As Sara Roth thoroughly demonstrates in her work *Gender and Race in Antebellum Popular Culture* (2013), the portrayals of race (and gender) from the 1820s to the advent of the Civil War carried deep socio-cultural and political implications reflecting the turmoils of the soon-to-be divided nation. The contested representations of black men as docile, child-like servants or lustful, rebellious savages propagated in popular novels, pamphlets, political cartoons evinced the

many power struggles occurring at the heart of an ever-changing American society. The portrayal of slaves by writers of children's fiction in the early part of the nineteenth century as being childishly simple-minded and severely unsophisticated functioned "primarily as a means of situating [African-Americans] at the lower end of a fixed racial hierarchy" (30). In this demasculized black male caricature deprived of "any possibility of realizing the full measure of masculinity in American culture," young white males were shown the anti-thesis of their own future as a "true man" who "governed the household in which he lived, made all financial and political decisions, and controlled and protected those within his domain" (23-24). However, after the bloody revolt of Nat Turner, "writers in the 1830s, regardless of their position on slavery, began to explore the idea that African American men were, or under the right conditions could be, dangerous brutes" (38-39). Key to most depictions of savage slaves was a focus on "the suffering that defenseless white females experienced at the hands of black male insurrectionists"—an interplay of race and gender stereotypes that would continue to haunt post-Emancipation America (42). In both the demasculized, child-like slave and the hyper-masculized and sexualized rebellious slave, consequently, white male Americans constructed and reinforced the parameters of their masculinity. Even more interestingly, just as Jordan suggests that the indigenous African was for Protestant English society a black body upon which they could project their own desires, Roth asserts that white male Americans used portrayals of African Americans as licentious savages to "indulge fictively in acts that terrified but also intrigued them" (48):

Invoking the savage slave allowed white male writers and readers to experience vicariously the abandonment of restraint their culture denied them, as they witnessed fictional black men gleefully destroying some of the most revered

symbols of civilization and of morality, including, significantly, white women. Yet displacing these desires on black men also allowed white men to distance themselves from such unacceptable behavior, assigning to black men the inability to check their impulses toward anger, lust, or cruelty. (48)

Furthermore, as Roth convincingly argues, it was not simply white American men that constructed their identities through the racist constructions of black slaves; white women would eventually employ black stereotypes as well to better their own status within the patriarchal and racial hierarchy of antebellum society. During the 1850s, female authors began appropriating the aforementioned child-like, subservient image of the black slave first created in the juvenile fiction of the 1820s (also written by white women writers) in order to overthrow the conventional stereotype of white women as weak victims or domesticated housewives. Towards the latter half of the 19th century, white female authors “began to enhance the status and authority of their white female characters” by “demasculizing black men” in their works (3). Hence, in their jockeying for social and gender equality with white men, white women writers ultimately maintained the racial hierarchy of American society.

From the birth of the nation to the decades of turmoil leading up to the Civil War, then, African Americans functioned for white Americans much like the newly-discovered Africans did for English society centuries earlier: as the reversed mirror image—the fundamental anti-thesis—to conceptions and constructions of themselves. As the struggle of white America to free itself from the gaze of its English origins led, to a large degree, to the division within the nation over proslavery and abolitionist debates, blacks remained central to the tenuous structure of American society and identity. When slaveowners first faced the question of converting their slaves, therefore, they were confronted with the very nature of their own

identities. For a slave to be a Christian, to be a *brother* or *sister* in Christ to slaveowners, potentially threatened the symbolic, political, religious, and socio-cultural foundations upon which the American society rested upon. As Jordan states: “If the Negro were like themselves, how could they enslave him? How explain the bid on the block, the whip on the back? Slavery could survive *only* if the Negro were a man set apart; he simply had to be different if slavery was to exist at all” (Jordan 183-84). Therefore, even though laws were soon passed “between 1664 and 1706 in at least six colonies” that safeguarded against the manumission of baptized slaves, slaveowners still were wary of the effects of the egalitarian principles inherent within Christianity on the master-slave relationship (Alho 49). They feared that Christianity would make their slaves feel proud and entitled to the benefits of Christian brotherhood, and thus more difficult to manage and control (Alho 50; Lincoln 173; Raboteau 102-103). Raboteau succinctly summarizes:

The danger beneath the arguments for slave conversion which many masters feared was the egalitarianism implicit in Christianity. The most serious obstacle to the missionary’s access to the slaves was the slaveholder’s vague awareness that a Christian slave would have some claim to fellowship, a claim that threatened the security of the master-slave hierarchy. Even after other fears had been removed by legislation or by argument, unease with the concept of spiritual equality between master and slave caused slave owners to reject the idea of Christianizing their slaves” (*Slave Religion* 102).

Most prominently, these fears of slaveowners concerning the impact of the egalitarian nature of Christianity on their slaves culminated in the terrible prospect of slave revolts. The success of the Haitian War of Independence overseas in 1791 served as a sobering reminder

of the dangerous, revolutionary potential of slaves banding together ostensibly through religious beliefs, a fear that would be realized at home—though to a much smaller extent—in Nat Turner’s rebellion in 1831. Even more unthinkable than the dissolution of the institution of slavery and the dire implications it would entail for American society, the thought of a (successful) slave revolt akin to the magnitude of the American War of Independence meant the reversal of the racial hierarchy of the oppressed and oppressor. Indeed, the thought of “Negro rebellion presented an appalling world turned upside down, a crazy nonsense world of black over white, an anti-community which was the direct negation of the community as white men knew it” (Jordan 114).

In an effort to stymie the principles of equality and freedom in Christianity and the dystopian future of slave revolution it heralded, a “theology of slavery” (as Alho coins) or white theology was fashioned. As part of an effort by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts—a “missionary arm of the Church of England” organized to “minister to the colonists of America” and “to instruct the Indians and Negroes”—an “institutional attempt was made to confront the task of slave conversion” by primarily proving to slaveowners that “Christianity would actually better slaves” (*Slave Religion* 103; 114). Seeking to “control and make black people slaves to its *doctrinal propositions*,” such missionary efforts revolved around a catechism designed to outline the rudimentary beliefs necessary for slaves to be converted (“Slave Theology” 798). As a pamphlet published by William Knox at the end of the eighteenth century demonstrates, these catechisms were meant to negate any potential unrest between the converted slaves and their master:

That there is one God in heaven who never dies, and who *sees* and *knows* every thing. That he made all people, both whites and blacks. That he *punishes* all



roguery, mischief, and lying, either before death or after it. That he *punishes* them for it before they die, by putting it into their masters [sic] heart to correct them, and after death by giving them to the devil to burn in his own place. That he will put it onto their *masters* hearts to be kind to those who do their work without knavery or murmuring. (qtd. in Alho 64)

Knox's emphasis on the role of the slave's earthly master as a representative of God Himself who will judge him for any resistance and reward him for complete obedience encapsulates the hegemonic appropriation of Christianity by white society. The egalitarian potentiality of Christianity is negated by the implied sanctification of human slavery and the usurpation of God's judgment by slaveowners.

Accordingly, proponents of pro-slavery Christianity strove intensely to justify the bondage of African Americans through carefully selecting biblical passages which appeared to sanction the institution of slavery and skewing other passages which seemingly had nothing to with slavery at all (McKivigan and Snay 15). As Knox's pamphlet above indicates, a version of Christianity was crafted that ignored or denied any biblical principles, characters, and stories that could be construed as antithetical to or a condemnation of slavery. Old Testament events like the exodus of Israel from Egyptian bondage were generally ignored in catechisms meant to instruct slaves; rather, stories like the curse of Ham continued to be a focus for defenders of slavery, and certain books like *Leviticus* that contained the the Mosaic law's delineation of the master-servant relationship were emphasized (Alho 62; 66).

In the New Testament, the life and egalitarian messages of Jesus were muted, and the complexly theological epistles of Paul were emphasized and (mis)construed to defend slavery biblically. Deverux Jarratt, an evangelical Anglican of postrevolutionary Virginia,

epitomizes the widespread attempts by ministers to compromise slavery with New Testament theology. By contorting the metaphor of body in the New Testament epistles of Paul, Jarratt defended slavery as a necessary evil of fallen humanity. Whereas Paul employed the metaphor to explain how individual members of the body of Christ (the universal Christian church) contributed to one cause—“But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose”—Jarratt (and the many other ministers he represents) employed the metaphor to prove how “slavery in no way contradicted true religion but was, in fact, a necessary part of it” (I Cor. 12:18; Ambrose 42). Even more significantly, the doctrinal dichotomy between spiritual freedom and civic responsibility prevalent in Paul’s epistles was highlighted by pro-slavery theologians and ministers. Paul’s use of the metaphor of slavery to describe paradoxically the liberating relationship of Christians to Jesus was used to justify the physical slavery of blacks to their white masters. Admittedly, Paul undoubtedly strives in his epistles to absolve all conflicts between the master-slave relationship in a manner that does not completely do away with the institution of slavery itself, even sending the runaway Christian slave Onesimus back to his master in the epistle to Titus (Alho 63). However, the overarching emphasis of Paul’s doctrine of spiritual and physical slavery is the equality of all Christians under Jesus—regardless of ethnicity or social rank: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you all are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Nevertheless, for those seeking a biblical justification of chattel slavery, Paul’s theology offered them a seemingly perfect solution. Even when abolitionism rapidly grew in the 1830s, these Old and New Testament defenses of slavery would continue to be reinforced (McKivigan and Snay 15-16). As a booklet published by William S. Plumer in the late 1840s advises to missionaries and teachers of slaves: “Teach them what Paul

directed slaves to do and be; but beware of pressing these duties too strongly and frequently, lest you beget the fatal suspicion that you are but executing a selfish scheme of the white man to make them better slaves, rather than to make them Christ's freemen. If they suspect this, you labour in vain" (qtd. in Alho 138).

In spite of these machinations of pro-slavery Christianity, black slaves would counteract against the hegemony of white theology by *re*-appropriating the egalitarian and liberating potentialities of Christianity from white society. Before the Great Awakening and the subsequent wave of tent revivals it spawned, the plantation missions failed to reach or impact the majority of black slaves. The "objections of slaveholders," the "paucity of missionaries to catechize slaves," "linguistic and cultural barriers" with first generation African slaves, and the "very way in which conversion was generally perceived" "as catechesis, a time-consuming process of religious instruction" all contributed to the fact that "Christianity touched most slaves only indirectly if at all" (*Slave Religion* 125). By the "first century and a half of slavery," the S.P.G. missions had reported "little success with African-born slaves," with only a "small minority of slaves receiv[ing] instruction in the Christian faith" (*Slave Religion* 120; 125). Most slave narratives "indicate that the significance of the catechisms from the slaves' point of view was very small," making it evident that "catechisms never became an important source of religious tradition for the slaves, but were rather conceived of as books for the whites" (Alho 136). It was not until the religious fervor of the Great Awakening in the 1740s and the following Great Western Revival at the start of the 1800s that a large number of slaves had access and were converted to Christianity (Levine 61; West 84; Wills 214). The fiery nature of the preaching, singing, testifying, and praying of the evangelistic outreach compelled slaves far greater than the "dispassionate,

abstract theological arguments” offered in the “cold, impersonal churches of Puritan New England” (Lincoln 175). The emphasis on the experiential in the conversion experience versus the doctrinal in the catechisms of the plantation missions also made Christianity more palatable and accessible for slaves (and slaveholders) who were unable to read or write (*Slave Religion* 132).

Culturally, the ecstatic behavior prevalent in these camp-meeting revivals’ sermons and conversion experiences accommodated the slaves’ West African heritage of spirit possession, dance, and singing. Although significant “[d]ifferent theological meanings [were] expressed and experienced” between the slaves’ prior West African cultural practices and Protestant Christianity, the “similar patterns of response” identifiable in the African-American slaves’ Christian forms of worship and praise—such as “rhythmic clapping, ring-dancing,” and certain “styles of singing”—undoubtedly “reveal the [their] African religious background” (“Death of the Gods” 263). There were “enough similarities to make it possible for slaves to find some common ground between the beliefs of their ancestors and those of the white Christians” (*Slave Religion* 127). In that regard, the slaves’ *re*-appropriation of Christianity from their owners and society at large expressed itself first in the cultural remnants or “Africanisms” of their prior lives. Although the middle passage to the New World largely resulted in the destruction of their West African identity, African-American slaves—even within the liminal space of social death—were able to reconstruct core aspects of their past identity through the medium of Christianity. Though the Trinity of the Christian religion replaced the former gods of the slaves’ various West African backgrounds, their Christian identity nevertheless validated and gave voice to their heritages, as opposed to the catechisms of the plantation missions which worked to maintain the cultural erasure of the slaves and

solidify the master-slave relationship. Raboteau summarizes: "...even as the gods of Africa gave way to the God of Christianity, the African heritage of singing, dancing, spirit possession, and magic continued to influence Afro-American spirituals, ring shouts, and folk beliefs. That this was so is evidence of the slaves' ability not only to adapt to new contexts but to do so creatively" ("Death of the Gods" 277).

Most importantly, the Great Awakening and the later mass tent revivals it spawned stressed to black slaves a key component of Protestant Christianity left out of the hegemonic version of Christianity propagated to them: the equality of men before God. George Whitefield, perhaps the most prominent and well-known figure of the first Great Awakening, preached to slaveholders in 1740: "Think you are any better by Nature than the poor Negroes? No, in no wise. Blacks are just as much, and no more, conceived and born in sin, as White Men are. Both, if born and bred up here, I am persuaded, are naturally capable of the same...improvements" (qtd. in Alho 52). Thus, in its heavy emphasis upon the "inward conversion experience," the Great Awakening "de-emphasize[d] the outward status of men," and "cause[d] black and white alike to *feel* personally that Christ had died for them as individuals" (*Slave Religion* 148). At its most radical moments, the "universalistic dimension" of evangelism resulted in situations where black preachers gave sermons to unconverted whites (133; 148). This egalitarian, universalistic centrality of Christianity and the potentiality of personal worth and resistance it entailed provided slaves with the means to fight against the oppression and social death of slavery. In their conversion to and re-appropriation of Christianity, slaves were able to form "deep bonds of fellowship and a reference point for self-assurance during times of doubt and distress," giving them a "special self-identity and self-esteem in stark contrast with the roles imposed upon them by American

society” (West 85). In opposition to the racist stereotypes of blacks that white American society formulated to reinforce their own identities, Christianity provided African Americans freedom from the oppressive dichotomies of man/animal and civilized/savage-heathen that served to dehumanize them.

Within the slaves’ religious identities, though, a division still persisted: the conflict between African-American Christianity and white Christianity. Just as the construction of the white American self was founded to a large extent upon the counter-image of the black American, the African-American Christian self was distinguished by its contradistinction to the hypocrisy and hegemony of white Christian masters and ministers. Alho states concerning the recognition of a white versus black Christianity within the slave narratives:

Although doctrinal discussions and memories are infrequent in the narratives, they reveal that the slaves themselves—as well as ex-slaves—were clearly conscious of the peculiar and original nature of their religion. One might go as far as to say that the very notion of the *uniqueness of black religion* is the outstanding doctrinal element in the slave narratives. This notion had the character of a basic religious tenet: the relationship of the slaves with God was essentially different from that of the whites. (133)

Clearly, slaves were highly aware of the hypocrisy of their masters’ hegemonic version of Christianity. Literally “thousands of slave testimonies” express “overt statements and implications” “decrying religious hypocrisy” (Lovell, Jr. 151). The words of Frederick Douglass powerfully encapsulate this disposition of slaves towards white Christianity:

I love the pure, peaceable and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and

hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, the grossest of all libels. (191).

To Christian slaves, then, the “carefully constructed theology of slavery built up by the whites became in many plantations nothing more than a joke” (Alho 139).

This divided religious identity of slaves manifested itself physically and spatially in the “black-church-within-the-white-church arrangement” (Lincoln 163). Through the “tension between Christian fellowship and the system of slavery” caused by the segregated seating of white churches, the Christianity of whites and blacks confronted each other in an uneasy, untenable union: although Christian fellowship “required that all church members be treated alike,” “slavery demanded that black members, even the free, be treated differently” (181). Unable to worship their God one-to-one, face-to-face, in white churches, slaves were forced to practice their religion through the repressive gaze of their masters. Thus, it was in the “secrecy of the quarters” and the “seclusion of the brush arbors”—away from the visible church of white Christianity—that slaves would make “Christianity truly their own” (*Slave Religion* 212). In the “illegal and hidden religious practices” of the “Invisible Institution,” black slaves—though “chained and illiterate”—“dared to *think* theologically by testifying to what the God of Moses had done for them” (“Slave Theology” 790). In direct contrast to the Christianity practiced in their masters’ churches, slaves were able to meet God “on their [their] own terms and in [their] own way without the white intermediary” (Lincoln 164). The “various stratagems” slaves conceived to conceal their secret meetings evinces how the Invisible Institution “symbolized both a cultural statement of slave theology and a liberated

space in which slaves controlled the political power to develop their theology” (796). In terms of *sui generis* conceptions of religion, as Levine has explored in *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1978), the slaves created a “sacred space” in the Invisible Institution. In response to the chaos and oppression around them, they could experience in their private worship of sacred God an “absolute reality” that conversely and ontologically “fixe[d] the limits and establish[ed] the order of the world” (Eliade 30). Furthermore, the “sense of self-worth” they gained through their religious identity “was fortified by the religious rhetorics used in the construction of a communal identity” (West and Glaude, Jr. xxi). Despite the designs of plantation owners in disrupting any opportunities for slaves to form a community amongst themselves, the unifying power of Christianity gave slaves a bond which revitalized their lost West African heritages, affirmed their personal worth, and provided them with a political platform in the eventual creation of the black church. In stark contrast to the dehumanizing acts of dancing and singing they had to perform at slave auctions, the ring shout celebrated during these hidden meetings affirmed their cultural history. As a microcosm of the uniqueness of the slaves’ Christianity from their masters’, the Invisible Institution illustrates the various ways the slaves’ religious identity was by nature one of divisions—“both institutional and noninstitutional, visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted” (*Slave Religion* 212).

Finally, in their theology and worship of God, slaves turned away from the catechisms of the plantation missions and Signified directly upon the egalitarian principles of biblical Christianity. Being “distrustful of the white folks’ interpretation of the Scriptures,” they maintained their own interpretations of Scripture—though not through actually reading the Bible (*Slave Religion* 239). Instead, slaves relied upon the communal creations, sharing, and



singing of songs to develop and fortify their theology in opposition to that of their masters. Because of their inability to “read the Bible for themselves,” “most slaves learned the message of the Christian Gospel and translated it into songs in terms of their own experience” (243). Therefore, in order to study how the “characters, themes, and lessons of the Bible became dramatically real and took on special meaning for the slaves,” we must turn to their music for answers (243). In them, we can see the reimagining of the slaves’ West African heritage, the counter-hegemonic, artistic acts of their Signification upon the Scriptures, and the emergence of Jesus as *the* figurehead of African-American Christianity and all its complex historical, socio-cultural, theological, and political implications.

### Chapter 3: The Slave Songs and Massa Jesus

#### I

Although the specific origins of slave songs remain a mystery, some scholars speculate that their “most prolific period of composition” occurred sometime between the last half of the eighteenth century until Emancipation in the mid-nineteenth century (L. Jones 3). References in print to the them as a “distinctive genre” did not appear until early in the nineteenth century, the designation of the music of the slaves as “spirituals” being in “common usage by the 1860s” (Southern 180). Although the slaves also created and sang secular songs as well, it was “black religious song that fascinated and attracted the early collectors of slave music” (Levine 17). The songs were first introduced to the public and made popular by the Fisk Jubilee Singers, with other major universities like Hampton, Calhoun School, Atlanta University, and Tuskegee Institute following suit in the collection and preservation of the slaves’ music (J.W. Johnson 47). Initial scholarship on the slave songs revolved around debates concerning their “weird” sound, their aesthetic or musical value, and the influence of the slaves’ West African heritages upon them (Levine 19; Ramey 3). Early detractors questioned the originality of the songs compared to other genres, denigrating them as inferior to European standards of music (J.W. Johnson 17). Since then, however, they have unquestionably been recognized, in the words of Du Bois, as “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas,” the “singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people” (*Souls* 155). Today, the slave

songs are “generally appreciated and studied for their musical significance, influence, and beauty, including serving as the foundation of gospel, jazz, and the blues” (Ramey xiv).

Recently, Lauri Ramey has focused on the “literary” qualities of the slave songs, arguing in *Slave Songs and the Birth of African American Poetry* (2008) for a recognition of the music of the slaves as part of the canon of the “full, rich historical range of American poetry” (xvi).

At its most fundamental level, the slave songs—as “historical documents”—provide us with a window into the nature, content, and character of the theology and Christianity of the slaves like no other source, including the slave narratives (Fisher xi). In the creative process of these songs, the West African cultural pasts of the slaves converged with the Christian religion of their enslaved present, resulting in a complete counter-hegemonic movement against the oppression of white society. While little to nothing is known for sure about the authors of the slave songs, the fluidity of content and meaning and the communal dimension of the songs reveal the artistic acts of Signification and revitalizations of West African cultural practices that went into their creations. As products of “improvisational communal consciousness,” slave songs were “*simultaneously* the result of individual and mass creativity,” a “folk process” in which “older songs are constantly re-created into essentially new entities” (Levine 29). These improvisations central to the construction and performance of slave songs speak to the African tradition of music-making (Southern 185). Consequently, “at no time did slaves create a ‘final’ version of a spiritual. Always the community felt free to alter and re-create them” (Levine 30). Much of the ingenuity of the songs, therefore, lies in its constant revisions and reinterpretations of white Protestant hymns, biblical Christianity, the musical forms of West Africa, and the very songs themselves (Southern 188; Maultsby 198). Structurally, the slave songs reflect the West African cultural function they served for

communities of slaves. As mentioned before, the “most genuine and commonest social context” of the slaves’ music was in their secret religious meetings, the Invisible Institution (Alho 122). The communal singing and performance of the songs during these gatherings were “characterized by a strong emphasis on call and response, polyrhythms, syncopation, ornamentation, slides from one note to another,” “repetition,” “body movement, hand-clapping, foot-tapping, and heterophony”—all undeniable traits of “their African heritage” (“Death of the Gods” 265). Accordingly, even though the slave songs “were created in a situation of oppression and suffering in America, the cultural tools used to guide religious expressions were African cultural features” (Matthews 17).

Through these West African forms of music-making and performance, slaves were able to find a culturally affirming expression for their new religion. While the structure, style, and ritual of the slave songs were African by nature—the “ring shout” being the primary example—the former “names and words of the African gods were replaced by biblical figures and Christian imagery” (“Death of the Gods” 265). In the multitude of Old and New Testament characters and events that inundate their music, slaves signified upon the potentiality of resistance and power inherent within biblical, Protestant Christianity. As John Lovell asserts: “The slave relied upon religion, not primarily because he felt himself ‘converted,’ but because he recognized the power inherent in religious things” (229). By identifying with biblical figures like Noah, Daniel, Moses, Jonah, Lazarus, Peter, Paul, and Elijah, slaves *re-appropriated* the egalitarian principles of Christianity from the hegemonic employments of their masters. Their presence and function within the songs reflect how the slaves “reshaped the original material to their own concerns,” despite the paradox that marked their conversion to and re-appropriation of Christianity (Southern 200). As Allen

Callahan implies, the slaves' Signification upon the Bible fundamentally represented the double consciousness or division of their religious identity:

African Americans found the Bible to be both healing balm and poison book.

They could not lay claim to the balm without braving the poison. The same book was both medicine and malediction. To afford themselves its healing properties, African Americans resolved to treat scripture with scripture... Their cure for the toxicity of pernicious scripture was more scripture. The antidote to hostile texts of the Bible was more Bible... (40)

To combat white interpretations of scripture like the Old Testament curse of Ham or the New Testament theology of the Apostle Paul meant to make slaves docile and subservient, slaves did not turn away from biblical Christianity; rather, they ingeniously Signified upon the same scripture of their masters and found within it a source of resistance and empowerment.

A salient example of the slaves' re-appropriation of scripture from white society is the biblical story of the children of Israel's freedom from Egyptian bondage. Following the victory of the Revolutionary War and the subsequent independence from the England's control, white America identified with the themes of chosenness, deliverance, and nationhood in the Exodus narrative (Glaude, Jr. 46-48). In the ideology of Manifest Destiny, white American Christians "saw themselves as a new Israel," a nation chosen by God to travel, expand, and grow in power (*Slave Religion* 251). However, within their mission from God as His new children, America re-enacted in tragic irony another Exodus story in their enslavement of Africans, thus assuming the role of oppressor/Egypt formerly symbolized in England. In songs like "Go Down, Moses," consequently, slaves reclaimed the role of

oppressed Israel from white America and aligned their own identities and sufferings with the God of deliverance:

When Israel was in Egypt's land:

Let my people go;

Oppressed so hard they could not stand,

Let my people go.

Refrain:

Go down, Moses, 'Way down in Egypt land,

Tell ole Pharaoh, Let my people go. (*Songs of Zion*)

By Signifyin(g) upon the story of Moses and the children of Israel, slaves subverted white America's identification with and employment of scripture and re-appropriated for themselves the sources of power and resistance within it. Eddie Glaude asserts: "African Americans appropriations of the Exodus story designated the God of Israel as the God of oppressed blacks in the United States. This designation was important in the processes of self-identification, which stood over and against white Christian claims that God intended Africans to be slaves" (44). As yet another microcosm of the divided religious identity of the slave—the white American Israel versus the black American Israel—the slaves' Signification upon the Exodus story demonstrates how the paradoxical re-employment of the oppressive religion of their masters provided them with the means to resist through the medium of that religion.

As powerful as the identification with the children of Israel was for African-American slaves, however, there is a biblical person even more central and important in the music of the slaves than Moses—that being Jesus Christ. As many scholars have noted, even in most

references to Moses, the slaves actually were alluding to the liberating figure of Jesus; his presence and relevancy to the slaves were not limited solely to the New Testament. Indeed, often the very “image of Moses, the this-worldly leader of his people out of bondage, and Jesus, the otherworldly Redeemer, blended into a pervasive theme of deliverance” (Genovese 253). In the fusion of Moses and Jesus, as Eugene Genovese succinctly summarizes, “the two aspects of the slaves’ religious quest—collective deliverance as a people and redemption from their terrible personal sufferings—had become one through the mediation of that imaginative power so beautifully manifested in the spirituals” (253). This blending of time and space in the songs shows the slaves’ unbound creativity to interact *with* the characters and events of the Bible. African Americans re-contextualized the well-known biblical tales and figures of ancient times to accommodate the realities of slavery they faced. As one song illustrates, boundaries of time and space between the Old Testament and the New Testament did not exist: “Oh Mary, don’t you weep,/ don’t you mourn,/ Pharaoh’s army got drowned” (*Songs of Zion*). Likewise, in songs about Jesus, slaves did not treat his death, burial, and resurrection as events of a far-away past; rather, they positioned themselves *in* the time frame and physical space of the major events of Jesus’s life. Though the slave songs do express the doctrinal character of African-American Christianity, Jesus was not primarily “the subject of theological questioning”; rather, he “was perceived in the reality of the black experience” (*The Spirituals and the Blues* 47).

Furthermore, in their Signification upon and identification with Jesus, slaves reclaimed the power of Christianity from white society by re-appropriating his theological nature, offices, and roles. As the theological center of Christianity and its over-arching message of salvation, the “personal history” of Jesus—“his life, death, and resurrection”—is the “centre”

of all “Christian understandings of salvation” (Hart 192-93). Accordingly, the various metaphorical roles of Jesus throughout the Bible serve as the overall framework of orthodox, Protestant Christianity. Though the metaphors concerning Christ’s salvific role(s) may seem disparate in contradistinction with each other, they are functionally “complementary” in their specific elucidations of the multi-dimensional nature of Christian soteriology. Consequently, to choose “a particular metaphor from among those available” and “develop it in isolation from or at the expense of others” would be “to risk a partial and inadequate grasp on the reality of [biblical] redemption” (190).

In delineating the interconnected metaphorical functions and roles of Jesus, Trevor Hart identifies three main categories: “metaphors of release,” “metaphors of transformation,” and metaphors of “access” to God. The first type of metaphors deals with Jesus’s power over death and demonic forces (Heb. 2:14) and—key to the slaves’ Signification upon Jesus—his releasing of “captives” or slaves to sin through his “life, death, and resurrection” (Luke 4:18-19) (194). His sacrifice on the cross frees former unbelievers from the ways in which “sin employs the law as a device of restraint” (Gal. 4:4; Heb. 9:15) (194). The second type of metaphors evinces the ways the conversion experience and subsequent relationship with Jesus changes the “human condition” (194). More specifically, it enumerates the ways Jesus’s salvation “bestows” “eternal life in union” with him (1 John 5:11), the “personal indwelling of God’s Spirit” (1 Cor. 3:16), “the moral fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22), the “eventual glorification of” the human body (1 Cor. 15:43), and “participation in the divine nature” of Christ (2 Pet. 1:4) (194). Lastly, the third type of metaphors explain how Christ’s death fulfills the Old Testament sacrificial system and purifies unbelievers “from the ritual



defilement of sin,” and “mediates between the most Holy God and sinful humans” (Heb. 9:15)—the priestly function of Christ alluded to in Du Bois’s metaphor of the veil (195).

These metaphorical roles of Jesus become re-contextualized in the songs of the slaves as counter-theological acts of resistance against the (mis)appropriation of biblical Christianity by their masters and society at large. Dwight Hopkins writes: “Jesus’ offices and attributes brought joy because slaves rightly perceived an incarnational divine purpose that not only privileged the lowly social location of poor blacks but also marshalled all of creation for their ultimate deliverance” (“Slave Theology” 812). Thus, as their new “massa” who freed them from spiritual slavery, slaves found in Jesus ontological meaning that contradicted the liminality of social death in their relationship to their earthly masters:

O reign, O reign, O reign, my Saviour

Reign, Massa Jesus, reign,

O reign salvation in my soul,

Reign, Massa Jesus, reign

I shall never forget that day,

Reign, Massa Jesus, reign,

When Jesus washed my sins away,

Reign, Massa Jesus, reign

I look’d at my hands and my hands look’d new,

Reign, Massa Jesus, reign.

I look'd at my feet and they look'd so too,  
 Reign Massa Jesus reign.

I never felt such love before,  
 Reign, Massa Jesus, reign...(Dett 49).

Emblematic of the slaves' divided religious identity, songs like "Reign, Massa Jesus" inherently distinguish the slaves' "Massa Jesus" from the horrors of their earthly masters:

Mother, is massa gwine to sell us tomorrow?

Yes, yes, yes!

Mother, is massa gwine to sells us tomorrow?

Yes, yes, yes!

Mother, is massa gwine to sell us tomorrow?

Yes, yes, yes!

O watch and pray! (230)

Most importantly, in juxtaposition to their earthly masters who would "sell us tomorrow," Massa Jesus is a friend. As these two songs highlight:

In de mornin' when I rise,

Tell my Jesus huddy [hello], oh;

I wash my hands in de mornin' glory,

Tell my Jesus huddy, oh. (Allen, Ware, and Garrison 67)

Ole Satan is a busy ole man,

He roll stones in my way;

Mass' Jesus is my bosom friend,  
 He roll 'em out o' my way. (77)

This added dimension of friendship to the master-slave relationship differentiates itself from their relationship to their earthly masters. As a “bosom friend” whom they can converse with on an intimate level and who actually relieves the burden of labor instead of assigning it, “Mass' Jesus” fundamentally contradicted the master-slave relationship of slavery. The ontological worth slaves found in their Massa Jesus directly confronted the liminal status of social death of slavery, allowing them to “step outside of the master-slave relationship, which defined them as a means to the master’s end, and to see themselves as self-determining agents” (West and Glaude, Jr. xx). To that effect, certain songs even confront the dehumanizing rituals of the auction block and the re-naming of slaves:

Slav'ry chain done broke at las',  
 broke at las', broke at las,  
 Slav'ry chain done broke at las',  
 Goin' to praise God 'til I die, die.

Now no more weary trav'lin'  
 'Cause my Jesus set-a me free  
 An' dere's no more auction block for me  
 Since He give me liberty. (Dett 5)

No more auction block for me,  
 No more, No more,

No more auction block for me,  
 Many thousand gone. (233)

Ah tol' Jesus it would be all right,  
 if He changed mah name (repeat 3x). (*Songs of Zion*)

While there are certainly other-worldly implications in these songs' proclamations of freedom from the rituals of slavery discussed earlier in this chapter, there is also a this-worldly recognition of the limitations and, most important, ultimately *unsuccessful* attempt of the auction block to turn the slave into a commodified object. Though slaves were physically constrained, there are undeniable expressions of mental, emotional, and metaphysical/metaphorical/spiritual freedom when the song proclaims: "Cause my Jesus set'a me free/ An' dere's no more auction block for me/ Since he give me liberty" (Dett 5). Likewise, just as the changing of slaves' names worked to destroy their West African identities, the new name and identity given to slaves by Massa Jesus affirms the slaves' past and present, as discussed in the West African cultural function of slave religion. Perhaps even more poignantly, the changing of names by Massa Jesus is done by the request of slaves, an indication of a personal agency denied in the social death of slavery. As Howard Thurman writes: "And this is the miracle of [the creators of the slave songs] achievement causing them to take their place alongside the great creative religious thinkers of the human race. They made a worthless life, the life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, *worth living!*" (49). Hence, as another song proclaims, there was a quality of life gained by slaves in their relationship to Massa Jesus despite the social death of physical slavery: "How can I die when I'm in de Lord?/ Massa Jesus is comin' bye an' bye" (J.R. Johnson 134).

Moreover, by making Jesus a co-sufferer with and savior of blacks, slaves disrupted the conflation of metaphysical denigrations of blackness with physical blackness which scaffolded together to reduce blacks to sub-human chattel on all levels. Indeed, of all the metaphorical roles of Jesus Signified upon by slaves, his figure as a Suffering Savior is the most predominant one. The death of Christ is a prevalent subject throughout the songs:

Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, (repeat 2x)

Surely He died on Calvary.

Ev'ry time I think about Jesus, (repeat 3x)

Surely He died on Calvary. (*Songs of Zion*)

They crucified my Saviour and nailed Him to the cross,

They crucified my Saviour and nailed Him to the cross, cross...(*Songs of Zion*)

Jesus, shall I die?

Die on the cross, shall I die? (Allen, Ware, and Garrison 52).

O de Lamb done been down here an' died,

De Lamb done been down here an' died (179)

Dey crucified my Lord,

An' He never said a mumblin' word.

Dey crucified my Lord,

An' He never said a mumblin' word.

Not a word—not a word—not a word. (J.R. Johnson 174)

They nail my Jesus down

They put him on the crown of thorns,

O see my Jesus hangin' high!

He look so pale an' bleed so free:

O don't you think it was a shame,

He hung three hours in dreadful pain? (qtd. in *The Spirituals and the Blues* 53).

In singing of the crucifixion of Jesus, slaves did more than mourn his death—they identified and aligned themselves with it. They “fused” into “the story of the crucifixion” “their very own pathos,” thereby condemning the cruelty of slavery (J.W. Johnson 40). One of the most well-known slave songs powerfully captures this dynamic:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

Oh, Sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble,

Were you there when they crucified my Lord? (J.R. Johnson 146-47).

By projecting their suffering unto the person of Jesus, the slaves were, in essence, recreating the Jesus formally of white Christianity into a Savior of African Americans as well. The question that asks the listener whether they were present at the crucifixion is both accusatory and rhetorical. For those white slave masters who claimed to be Christians, the question is a pointed accusation at their hypocrisy; conversely, for those fellow blacks enduring the almost unbearable weight of slavery, the answer is implied in the (rhetorical) question. James Cone

answers: “Black slaves were there! Through the experience of being slaves, they encountered the theological significance of Jesus’ death. With the crucifixion, Jesus makes an unqualified identification with the poor and helpless and takes their pain upon himself. They were there at the crucifixion because his death was for them” (“Black Spirituals” 782). Illustrating the “uncanny conceptual ability” of the slave songs “to forge images and metaphors that allow [slaves] to virtually ‘fly’ through the Old and New Testaments,” the song in question creates a palimpsestic layering of time and space which places slaves at the crucifixion of their Jesus (Ramey 61). As Lauri Ramey asserts:

[The] phrasing suggests that the speaker has viewed these events firsthand, which would locate him in the chronological frame of the New Testament. In the compressed simplicity of the blended space, there is an uncanny resonance between Jesus’s crucifixion and death and their impact as continuous theological occurrences that exist outside of history. The blend also expresses the combination of the intimate and expansive by cross-referencing the enormity of Jesus’s physical suffering with the slave and observer’s human-scale response of trembling. (80)

Theologically, the incarnation of Christ entails a blending of space and time in which Jesus “move[s] into historical solidarity with all human beings, as well as with the whole created world, “enter[ing] history to become, in a sense, every man and every woman” (O’ Collins 324). In songs where slaves positioned themselves through time and space to the very foot of Jesus’s cross, then, they signified upon the merging of the eternal and the temporal in Jesus’s divine nature itself in order to position themselves radically at the very crucifixion of Jesus.

Furthermore, in their identification with the death of Jesus, slaves also partook in his divine nature, redeeming their blackness from white dehumanization. It is primarily Jesus's humanity that enables him to be a figure of shared suffering. As paradoxically both God and Man, Jesus serves as New Testament mediator between God and Man. As Gerald Collins writes concerning the significance of Jesus's divine nature:

The pastoral case is strong and obvious for recognizing the importance of Christ being truly and fully human. Through the incarnation, the Son of God experiences at first hand what it is to be human—with all our limits, including death. As one of us, he can experience and love us. Second, he can represent us before/to God because he belongs to us by completely sharing our condition in life and death. (236)

Therefore, because Jesus's divinity allows Christians to “identify him as divine, God-with-us,” the slaves' Signification upon Jesus as a suffering (i.e. human) Saviour cannot be overstated. As a people who suffered *with* Jesus, then, slaves reclaimed him from white Christianity as a comforter of and co-sufferer with blacks:

I'm troubled (2x)  
 I'm troubled in the mind,  
 If Jesus don't help me  
 I sho'ly will die.

Oh, Jesus my Saviour,  
 on Thee I'll depen',



When troubles am near me,  
 You'll be my true friend. (J.R. Johnson 120-21)

Nobody knows de trouble I see, Lord,  
 Nobody knows de trouble I see;  
 Nobody knows de trouble I see, Lord  
 Nobody knows like Jesus. (140-41).

O, a little talk wid Jesus, makes it right, all right;  
 Little talk wid Jesus makes it right, all right.  
 Lord, troubles of ev'ry kind,  
 Thank God, I'll always find,  
 Dat a little talk with Jesus makes it right. (74)

In the re-appropriations of and identifications with their master's Jesus throughout these songs, slaves re-signified the metaphysical and metaphorical significations of blackness, directly challenging centuries' worth of racist sentiments attached to notions of physical and metaphysical blackness. Negated by their absence are the employments of scriptures to curse the blackness of slaves or the justifications of slavery to cruel masters, and in its place reign proclamations of ontological status and personal worth grounded in the suffering figure of Jesus.

Furthermore, by making him their savior, African Americans were able to resist against the dehumanization of slavery that sought to relegate blacks to a sub-human level beneath the

salvation of Christ and conversely utilize for themselves the egalitarian nature of his salvific death:

Hallelujah t' de Lamb,  
Jesus died for every man.

He died for yo' He died for me,  
He died t' set po' sinner free.

He died for de rich, He died for de po'  
But he ain't comin' here t' die no mo' (Dett 103)

As the leveling effect of the Great Awakening and the subsequent mass tent revivals illustrated, the salvific sacrifice of Jesus's death threatened—if not forthrightly contradicted—the master-slave relationship. In praising the salvation proffered by Jesus, slaves evinced in their music a recognition of this egalitarian nature of biblical Christianity. Whether “rich” or “po’,” Jesus died equally for all classes of humanity. The implications of Christ's universal death led slaves to sing proclamations of freedom and individuality while still ostensibly enslaved:

You got a right,  
I got a right,  
We all got a right,  
to the tree of life.  
Yes, tree of life. (J.R. Johnson 183)

Free at las', free at las'

I thank God I'm free at las'

Free at las', free at las'

I thank God I'm free at las'. (158)

See what wonder Jesus done,

O no man can hinder me! (repeat 2x) (Allen, Ware, and Garrison 59-60).

Of course, as detractors will aver, many other slave songs of freedom are undeniably tied to notions of death and an after-life, such as the lines of “Oh, Freedom!” express: “Oh, freedom! Oh, freedom! Oh, freedom over me!/ An' befo' I'd be a slave,/ I'll be buried in my grave,/ An' go home to my Lord an' be free” (Dett 110). Yet even in proclamations of other-worldly freedom, there is suggested in the song a courage and defiance against the oppression of slavery that reflects the “this-worldly” sentiments of freedom from the three songs before.

Finally, though his primary function within the songs was as a (co-)suffering Savior of blacks, Jesus's other royal and prophetic offices proffered slaves resources for triumph as well. As Du Bois noted about the “Sorrow Songs”: “Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond” (*Souls* 162). In King Jesus, blacks found a sword of justice not proffered in slavery:

Oh, who do you call de King Emmanuel?

I call my Jesus King Emmanuel

Oh, de King Emmanuel is a mighty ‘manuel;  
I call my Jesus King Emmanuel. (Dett 147)

O ride on, Jesus, ride on, Jesus,  
Ride on, conquerin’ King!  
I wan t’ go t’ hebb’n in de mo’nin’. (148)

Ride on, King Jesus,  
No man can a-hinder me,  
Ride on, King Jesus,  
No man can a-hinder me. (*Songs of Zion*)

Similar to the earlier song proclaiming a sense of personal freedom in the egalitarian nature of Jesus’s death, songs magnifying the royal office of Jesus evinced sentiments of courage and fearlessness from slaves. In the “conquerin’ King” and “mighty ‘manuel,” slaves could again proclaim, quite dangerously and perhaps only in the secret of the Invisible Institution, “No man can a-hinder me”—white or black.

Closely tied to the songs about Jesus’s kingship are those about the coming of a future Judgment Day:

And de moon will turn to blood (repeat 3x),

In dat day—O you, my soul! (Allen, Ware, and Garrison 155)

My Lord says he's gwinter rain down fire (J.R. Johnson 28)

Judgment, Judgment, Judgment Day is a-rollin' around,

Judgment, Judgment, Oh, how I long to go, (Dett 158)

Like songs about one day having a home in heaven—of which there are many—songs about the Judgment Day when King Jesus will enact justice and revenge upon evil doers speak to future, other-worldly expectations. The apocalyptic imagery is undoubtedly taken mostly from the book of Revelation (and perhaps influenced by other biblical stories like the Old Testament destruction of Sodom and Gomorra by God). Yet even in the delayed sense of justice these songs evince amidst the constant, ever-present injustices of slavery, there is again an undeniable recognition of the evils of slavery. In longing to go to Judgement Day, slaves implicated their masters and white society for their Christian hypocrisy; their expectations for the future day when blacks and whites would be judged equally by Jesus revealed their present-day acknowledgement of injustice and desire for (God's) vengeance.

Consequently, to dismiss the Jesus of the slaves—and the religion he embodied—is to ignore the theological content and cultural function of the slaves' music. Certainly, there are many songs that could be quoted which could be deemed as evidence of how Christianity was employed by white masters as a coping mechanism for slaves to endure the hardships of slavery. When slaves sang lines like—

Soon I will be done a-with the troubles of the world,  
Goin' home to live with God. (Dett 234)

O fare you well, my brudder,  
Fare you well by de grace of God,  
for I'se gwinen home;  
O'se gwinen home, my Lord (Allen, Ware, and Garrison 63-64).

Good Lord, in de manshans above (repeat 2x),  
My Lord, I hope to meet my Jesus dere  
In de manshans above. (143-44)

Good-by, my brudder, good-bye, Hallelujah!  
Good-by, sister Sally, good-bye, Hallelujah!  
Going home, Hallelujah!  
Jesus call me, Hallelujah! (133)

Don't be weary, traveller,  
Come along home to Jesus; (165-66)

—they revealed a sort of embrace of the sufferings of slavery in light of the future home they perceived awaiting them. However, just as Hart implied earlier concerning the multi-faceted biblical metaphors of Jesus, to focus solely on the “other-worldly” songs of the slaves and

isolate them from the many other songs which evince “this-worldly” realities runs the risk of skewing the religion of the slaves. As I have attempted to illustrate, when taken all together, the distinction between these two very broad categories of slave songs—other-worldly vs this-worldly—quickly becomes blurred. Even in songs of future expectations, there are recognitions by blacks of the evils of slavery and the hypocrisy of their “Christian” masters, as the words of Douglass earlier reinforced. Cone writes: “Whites may suppress black history and define Africans as savages, but the words of slave masters do not have to be taken seriously when the oppressed know that they have a *somebodiness* that is guaranteed by the heavenly Father who alone is the ultimate sovereign of the universe. That is what heaven meant for the slaves” (*The Spirituals and the Blues* 91). If anything, the themes of suffering, persecution, and future reward/judgement in many of the songs of the slaves reflect their foundation in biblical Christianity. As the following small selection of verses emphasize, the notion of enduring and *rejoicing* in suffering is an inescapable, fundamental aspect of Christianity:

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.  
(Luke 14:27)

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom. 5:3-5)

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom. 8:18)

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. (2 Cor. 4:8-10)

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1:2-4)

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. (1 Pet. 4:12-13)

Most importantly, to dismiss the slave songs as mere coping mechanisms for suffering designed by masters ignores the ways in which slaves re-signified and re-contextualized Christianity to provide themselves with ontological status, personal worth, and avenues of resistance in the egalitarian message and narrative of Jesus's life. That Christianity alleviated or made more endurable the dehumanizations of slavery cannot be denied, but neither can the ways slaves re-appropriated the hegemonic Christianity of their masters to forge for



themselves an identity apart from the liminality of social death and the racial stereotypes perpetuated by the institution of slavery and white society. Arthur Jones writes: “The true power of the songs was contained in the alternative definitions of the self that they facilitated. Regarded by their oppressors as chattel, Africans in bondage were able to retain their sense of themselves as whole human beings, as children of God” (8). Though slave owners sought to craft a religion of docility in which to control their slaves, they could not have predicted how the slaves would re-employ that same religion against them.

By Signifyin(g) upon the egalitarian principles of biblical Christianity, slaves fought against the religion of their masters and its dehumanizing effects through the avenues of resistance made possible through the re-appropriation of that same religion. Far from making slaves merely docile, their religion allowed slaves to “nurtur[e] a rebellion against and resistance to dehumanizing slavery” (Brown 27). Cone posits concerning the revisionist history of some scholars who have deemed the religion/music of the slaves as merely the propaganda of their masters:

...there was a tendency among historians to ignore the fact of slave resistance, preferring to believe that blacks completely internalized the white masters’ values. We know now that whatever is said about mental servitude, docility is not the whole story. For if slaves were as harmless as whites contended, why was there almost universal fear about slave insurrections? The fact is that much of the fear was well grounded. (*The Spirituals and the Blues* 25).

As the bloody revolt of Nat Turner in Southampton County, Virginia, on 1831 demonstrated to white slaveowners, the Christianity of slaves contained revolutionary and life-threatening potentiality. In his later statements after being captured, Turner credited the inspiration and

calling for his rebellion to Jesus: “I heard a loud noise in the heavens, and the Spirit instantly appeared to me and said the Serpent was loosened, and Christ had laid down the yoke he had borne for the sins of men, and that I should take it on and fight against the Serpent, for the time was fast approaching when the first should be last and the last should be first” (qtd. in Alho 227). Even though Turner’s revolt was somewhat of an exception to the rule, his Christ-led rebellion had deep, long-term effects upon white society, as evidenced in the stereotypes of blacks as rebellious savages created in response during the antebellum period.

Although most slaves did not participate in large-scale revolts, on a smaller yet not less significant level, Christianity provided slaves with a “new dimension of resourcefulness” (Thurman 43). The double meanings of songs like “Steal Away to Jesus,” which scholars and historians have widely discussed, served as codes for slaves to escape from their masters or to be able to meet secretly in the Invisible Institution. Emblematic of their divided religious identity, slaves “engineered a way of life that dichotomized between a conscious false display of the slave self in the company of the white master and an authentic expression of the true African American self in the presence of fellow enslaved blacks” (“Slave Theology” 822). In opposition to the hypocritical moral codes of their Christian masters, slaves developed their own code of ethics—particularly in commands against stealing. Accordingly, because slaves rationalized that “they themselves were stolen property,” they “persistently denied” in many slave testimonies “that this commandment applied to them” (*Slave Religion* 295). Furthermore, as many scholars have explored, African-American Christianity provided “to some extent, a political language [for blacks] to engage American slavery and racism” (West and Glaude, Jr.xxii). Genovese goes as far as deeming the slaves’ religious unity as “the creation of a protonational black consciousness” (168). Through biblical imagery like

the children of Israel's exodus from Egypt, slaves employed the "use of nation language" in forging a unified, proto-political identity (Glaude, Jr. 45). In that regard, the black church—and the figurehead role of the black preacher within it—though later heavily criticized in history for its supposed failure in bringing about meaningful social and political change, served initially as important socio-cultural platforms for African Americans.

Nevertheless, throughout all these forms and degrees of resistance, the very religion of the slaves in its re-significations and re-contextualizations of their masters' religion should be seen as a form of rebellion against the institution of slavery. As Raboteau convincingly argues:

Religious faith sometimes sustained the decision of slaves to flee or to revolt.

Slave rebelliousness should not be thought of exclusively in terms of acts such as arson, sabotage, flight or revolt, for religion itself, in a very real sense, could be an act of rebelliousness—an assertion of slave independence, which sometimes required outright defiance of the master's command. (*Slave Religion* 305)

Therefore, while debates concerning the resistive or acculturative nature of the slave's religion may to a large extent reflect the personal views of scholars themselves concerning the power and function of religion, what cannot be denied at the very least is the artistic ingeniousness of the slaves' Signification upon the hegemonic religion of their oppressors. Though African-American Christianity did not always lead to slave revolts, it engendered an identity independent from the racist caricatures of American society and characterized by a spirit of self-worth, pride, and resistance. Alho summarizes nicely this balance between the "this-worldliness" and "other-worldliness" of the slave's multi-dimensional religious identity:

What all this comes to is that some of the slaves, perhaps the majority of them, were able to transform the ‘slave religion’ taught them by the whites into a ‘religion of freedom.’ This Afro-American religion was either used to support their active resistance and their efforts to attain physical deliverance from slavery, or it provided them with the means for creating in their minds alternative realities to slavery and the possibility of identifying themselves as citizens of those imagined realms. Whether the alternative to slavery was an actual geographical location outside the slave South or a mental image, its creation and the striving towards it can be seen as a form of opposition to the institution of slavery. (233-34)

What ultimately becomes manifest in the slaves songs, then, is the birth of the slaves’ divided religious identity. From its inception, as Levine implies, the double consciousness of the slave’s religion in contradistinction to their master’s was perhaps an inevitable emergence: “The dilemma that white ministers faced was simple to grasp but not to resolve: the doctrine they were attempting to inculcate could easily subvert the institution of slavery—and both they and the slaves realized it. Thus tensions and contradictions were inevitable” (46). In re-claiming Jesus from the Christianity of their masters, the slaves demarcated African-American Christianity from white Christianity. To make Jesus a Suffering Savior, King, and “Massa” of African Americans was to critique and subversively re-appropriate the fundamental nature of white Christianity. Unlike the “White Christ” of slave owners who sanctified the institution of slavery, the slaves’ “Black Christ” “reflected an intimate relationship between Jesus and the slaves,” “radicalized the slaves to fight for their freedom,” and “illuminated the contradiction between Christianity and the cruelty of

slavery” (Douglas 18; 20). Though scholars like Orlando Patterson unnecessarily interpret the multiple metaphorical offices of Jesus as an inherent contradiction within Christianity that both gave slaves a sense of spiritual freedom and acculturated them to the dehumanizations and social death of slavery, each of the multi-faceted roles of Jesus Signified upon by the slaves worked together to formulate a Christianity that was diametrically opposed to that of their masters’.

## II

With the end of slavery, the divided religious identity of African Americans underwent radical changes. Following Emancipation, many ex-slaves initially rejoiced at the seemingly fulfilled prophecy of freedom they had prayed and sung for throughout their enslavement. As Du Bois wrote: “...few men ever worshipped Freedom with half such unquestioning faith as did the American Negro for two centuries. To him, so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice; Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of the wearied Israelites” (*Souls* 10). Yet like the generation of Israelites in the Old Testament who wandered in the desert for forty years and subsequently died having never reached the promised land themselves, the freed slaves soon realized their freedom was one that was still shackling and limiting. Thus, in 1903 Du Bois stated with the weight of post-Emancipation history behind him and its continued legacy before him: “For this much all men know: despite compromise, war, and struggle, the Negro is not free” (36). Put simply, despite the joys of certain liberties available to ex-slaves outside the shackling of chains, for freed slaves still lived in neo-slavery. This continued oppression from white American

society led to the emergence of the blues and, in the 1920s and 30s, the emergence of a physically black Jesus.

Just as the music of the slaves was created out of the slaves' re-contextualizations and re-significations of white Christianity, the blues evinced a further re-contextualization and re-signification of African-American Christianity—by African Americans themselves. In its deconstruction of the sacred/profane foundations of African-American Christianity, the blues marked an evolution of the double consciousness of the former slaves' religious identity. Whereas slaves signified upon the religion of their masters as acts of resistance, African Americans began signifyin(g) upon their own religious heritage in response to the changing realities of post-Emancipation America. What resulted was the fusing of the sacred with the sexual and the parodying of the prominent figure of the black preacher of the slaves' religion.

This ethos of the blues would culminate in the 1920s artistic movement of the Harlem Renaissance. In the decades leading up to the Civil War, the birth of Christian iconography coupled with the onset of the printing industry resulted in the mass production and widespread acceptance of Jesus as a physically white saviour. Though the Jesus of slave religion and music stood separate and against the Jesus of white Christianity, the battles at the site of Jesus's body were metaphysical and theological in nature. In that regard, the slaves' re-appropriation of Jesus is best understood as a metaphorical or metaphysical racialization of his status and function within white Christianity. Amidst the horrors of lynching, consequently, African-American artists began challenging the *physical* whiteness and ethnicity of Christ by portraying Jesus as a black lynched man. In their concerted efforts to create and define the New Negro, they also were simultaneously recreating and redefining the Jesus of their enslaved forefathers. Such a move drastically revised the former slaves'

relationship and identification with Jesus and challenged the symbol and position of Christ as the figurehead of the divided African-American religious identity.

The legacy of these conflicts would continue within the tumultuous Civil Rights Movement. In one respect, the battles between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X symbolized the struggles of African Americans over the Jesus of the slaves' religion and the black Jesus of the Harlem Renaissance era. Decades later, within the academy, liberation theologians would revitalize the questions of Jesus's physical and metaphysical blackness in their formulations of a black systematic theology.

#### **Chapter 4: The Blues and the Deconstruction of (Black) Christianity**

Following the Civil War and Emancipation, the lives of freed slaves and white Americans altered in dramatic ways. With the end of the institution of slavery and the subsequent decentralization of the black population, blacks were able to experience certain freedoms never available to them before: the freedom to wander and roam the land, engage in romantic relationships not designed by white owners for the purposes of “breeding” more chattel, and explore avenues of self-expression outside of religion. Many whites, conversely, faced economic, socio-cultural, and religious crisis following the collapse of the master-slave relationship upon which their entire former way of life rested upon. Without the economic fruits of slave labor, the socio-cultural construction of white identity through the dehumanization of black identity, and the religious justifications of white supremacy over and enslavement of blacks, white Americans found themselves in a state of chaos and flux. Nevertheless, although the relationship between blacks and whites fundamentally changed after the destruction of the master-slave dynamic, the decades and centuries following the Civil War entailed the systematic re-structuring of the former social hierarchy of antebellum American society. The Reconstruction of the divided nation saw the rebuilding of the fragmented white identity at the expense of the subjugation of blacks. Though the 13th Amendment ostensibly abolished slavery, blacks remained confined to the legal and socio-cultural confines of neo-slavery. After the doomed failure of Reconstruction, the creation of



the Jim Crow laws guaranteed the marginalized status of blacks in the “new,” postbellum American society.

In response to the disenfranchising laws created to stymie the progress of blacks and the perpetuance of antebellum stereotypes and racist sentiments in the postbellum society, freed blacks vented in their music the frustrations and oppression they continued to face after Emancipation. Just as the music of the slaves embodied the content and nature of their divided religious identity and its resistance against the hegemony of white Christianity, the songs of ex-slaves following the decades of the Civil War reflected the dramatic changes in the constructions of the former slaves’ new identities as freed men and women. Hence, the blues—like the antebellum slave songs before it—express the postbellum realities of blacks. Socio-culturally, they dealt with the same racist conceptions of metaphysical/metaphorical and physical blackness that the antebellum slaves had to face:

And I’m blue, black and evil, and I wished I had made myself, (qtd in *Blues Fell* 71)

Now, if you’re white

You’re all right,

If you’re brown,

Stick aroun’

But if you’re black

Git back! Git back! Git back! (qtd in *Spirituals and the Blues* 126)

Indeed, at times, the blues reflect the psychological internalization of these white, racist sentiments towards the darker pigmentation of other blacks:

Well, that jet black woman like to scare my mule to death. (qtd in Charters  
100)

Coal black women fry no meat for me

No coal black woman can fry no meat for me

You know black is evil that gal may poison me (Sackheim 303)

Therefore, if the dehumanization of slavery formed the setting from which the songs of the slaves arose, the *continued* dehumanizations of neo-slavery formulated the context of the blues. In their music, ex-slaves found a cathartic release through the voicing of the frustrations they continued to face, despite their freedom from slavery. Paul Oliver explains: “The blues acted as a catalyst for the anger, humiliation, and frustration that tended to demolish the moral codes and spirit of a man, and the act of creating blues brought satisfaction and comfort both to him and to his companions” (*Blues Fell* 54).

Like the songs of the slaves, the origins of the blues and its authors are largely unknown. W. C. Handy, the “first man to popularize the blues,” was “struck with the possibilities of utilizing it in musical composition in 1903 when he heard a man singing a song in a Mississippi train station” (Southern 332). Similarly, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, the “earliest professional blues singer,” recalled “first hearing the blues in 1902” (332). Accordingly, it is generally assumed that the earliest anonymous blues singers were “wanderers, sometimes blind, who carried their plaintive songs from one black community to another,” some “sauntering down railroad tracks or dropping from freight cars” and others “coming in with the packet boats” or “via the dirt road” (332). Created “in the late 1800s by [the] first generation of black Southerners born outside of slavery,” the blues reflect the

(limited) freedoms of Emancipations afforded to the ex-slaves (Aschoff 43). In that regard, as many scholars have noted, the “blues did not exist in slavery” (*Story of the Blues* 11). Most obviously, the blues express the effects of physical freedom and the sense of wandering, individualism, and isolation afforded by it that slaves could not have experienced under the chains of slavery. As a result of the “myriad of artistic and creative possibilities” that freedom from slavery gave to African Americans, the blues are “resplendent with images of roads, rivers, and railroad tracks to be traveled; with cars, boats, and trains to serve as vehicles useful both in going to and coming from; and with oceans, mountains, and deserts to either be traversed in pursuit of a desire or placed in the path of pursuing troubles” (Aschoff 42; 44).

Most prominently, the freedom to explore romantic relationships—and its oftentimes sexual implications—pervades the songs of the blues. Of the vast spectrum of topics and aspects of black life covered in the blues, the “most broadly woven strand in the texture of the blues is the despair of love,” especially in its expressions of the sexual dimension of failed, adulterous, or frustrated relationships (Charters 8). Offering both male and female perspectives, many of the blues tell of the troubles, the infidelities, the excitements, the innuendos, the domestic violence, the pleasures, and even the homo-eroticisms of romantic relationships that ex-slaves began to experience after the confinements of slavery:

Peach orchard mama, you swore nobody'd pick your fruit but me

Peach orchard mama, you swore that no one picked your fruit but me

I found three kid men shaking down your preaches free (Sackheim 78)

Make me a pallet on your floor (twice)

Just make me a, a pallet, baby, down upon your floor

When your main girl come I swear, she will never know (65)

I woke up this morning with the blues all 'round my bed (twice)

I felt just like somebody in my family was dead.

I began to moan and I began to cry (twice)

My sweet man went away, didn't know the reason why

If you don't like my sweet potato, what made you dig so deep (twice)

Dig my potato field tree, four times a week (44)

Ummmmh oh ain't got no mama now (twice)

She told me late last night, you don't need no mama no how

Mmmmmm mmmm black snake crawling in my room (twice)

And some pretty mama better come and get this black snake soon (80)

I beat my baby, man, with a rope and a line (twice)

I beat my baby—it ain't no joke, no lie this time—

with a rope and a lime, until she went blind (172)

Me and the Devil was walking side by side (twice)

I'm going to beat my woman, until I get satisfied (224)

Women loving each other, man, they don't think about no man, (twice)

They ain't playing no secret no more, these women playing it a wide open  
hand (228)

Jelly roll, jelly roll, jelly roll is so hard to find

Ain't a baker in town can bake a sweet jelly roll like mine (294)

What this small sample illustrates is the sheer multi-faceted dimensionality of the blues' treatment of romantic and sexual themes. Although enslaved blacks were denied for centuries in America from partaking in these range of human emotions and relationships, freed blacks quickly demonstrated in their music their creative, artistic ability to capture the depths of human experience, thereby emphatically showing the absurdity of their prior status as mere chattel. From the heartbreaking lament of "I began to moan and I began to cry/ My sweet man went away, didn't know the reason why" and the adulterous pleas of "Make a pallet on your floor.../ When your main girl come I swear, she will never know" to the homoerotic sensualism of "Women loving each other, man, they don't think about no man" and the playfulness of "Ain't a baker in town can bake a sweet jelly roll like mine," the blues treatment of (black) love and sexuality is unmatched. As Samuel Charter observes, "It is often in its colorful and elaborate sexual imagery that the blues is most vividly poetic" (80). Much of the genius of the blues treatment of black relationships, therefore, lives in its wide spectrum of human experience: the morbid solemnity of lines like "I'm going to beat my

woman, until I get satisfied” is balanced by the metaphoric seductiveness of “And some pretty mama better come and get this black snake soon.”

Therefore, while the situation of blacks after Emancipation remained bleak, they nonetheless were allotted semblances of freedom that greatly affected their lifestyles and worldviews. In that sense, the “Reconstruction did give the Negro a certain feeling of autonomy and self-reliance that could never be fully eradicated even after the repressive segregation measures” (L. Jones 52). In lyrics expressing the frustrations of failed romantic relationships, the desires and excitements of sexual promiscuity, the lonesome wanderings of the bluesman and woman, and questions of theodicy and suffering, ex-slaves put into music the changing nature of their lives and identities as African Americans. As Elijah Wald writes, “Such celebrations of sexual freedom reflected not only the complexities and varieties of personal relationships but also the exceptional mobility of personal relationships of African Americans at the height of the blues boom” (121). Precisely how or when “the blues was created,” consequently, “is less important than when it became a dominant musical form among Negroes throughout the country; when it can be taken as expressing the consciousness, the attitudes, the experiences of large numbers of Negroes in America” (Levine 221).

The physical and sexual freedoms of the blues most importantly mark the evolution of the slaves’ divided religious identity after Emancipation. While the slave songs dealt “with historical realities that are pre-Civil War,” the blues “are essentially post-Civil War in consciousness,” “reflect[ing] experiences that issued from Emancipation, the Reconstruction Period, and segregation laws” (*Spirituals and the Blues* 112). As a reflection of the post-Emancipation consciousness of former slaves, the blues evinces the “drastic change in the

Negro from slavery to ‘citizenship’”—from the “Negro as a slave” to the “Negro as American” (L. Jones ix-x). Levine notes concerning this transition from the slave songs to the blues: “If during slavery it was the secular songs that were occasional and the religious songs that represented the ethos of the black folk, in freedom the situation began to reverse itself. Secular songs became increasingly important in black folk culture in the decades following freedom” (190). Within that transition of the African-American identity, moreover, the blues fundamentally mark the evolution of the slaves’ divided religious identity. While the paradox of the slaves’ divided religious identity remained for freed blacks—the (re)appropriation of a religion initially employed to oppress and make docile slaves—the availability of avenues of self-expression apart from the black church allowed blacks to explore their own identities in ways not possible before Emancipation. As Amiri Baraka (formerly known as LeRoi Jones at the time of this writing) explains: “During the time of slavery, the black churches had almost no competition for the Negro’s time. After he had worked in the fields, there was no place to go for any semblance of social intercourse but the praise houses. It was not until well after the Emancipation that the Negro had much secular life at all” (48). However, with the “legal end of slavery,” as Baraka continues, “there was now proposed for the Negro masses a much fuller life *outside* the church. There came to be more and more backsliders, and more and more of the devil music was heard” (49).

Within the African-American community, then, a demarcation of the sacred and the profane occurred that could broadly be summarized by the religious on one hand, and the secular/worldly on the other. The denigration of blues as the “devil’s music” by the black religious community speaks to the crises of identity *within* the African-American world after the Civil War. From its very beginnings, the blues “was generally associated with the

lowly—received with warmth in the brothels and saloons of the red-light district, but generally rejected by ‘respectable,’ church-going people” (Southern 333). The ostensible “decline of the sacred world view” of the former slaves “inevitably created increasingly rigid distinctions among large numbers of black religious folk” (Levine 177). The remarks of ex-slave Harry Jarvis in the early 1870s concerning whether he would ever consider singing songs other than “spirituals” serve as a microcosm of the black community’s internal struggle over sacred and secular music/realms: “Not o’ dem corn shuckin’ songs, madam. Neber sung none o’ dem sence I ‘sperienced religion. Dem’s wickid songs...Nuffin’s good dat ain’t religious, madam. Nobody sings dem cornshuckin’ songs arter dey’s done got religion” (qtd in Levine 177). No longer was the double consciousness of the African American’s religious identity only a conflict between black and white Christianity—a division within black culture manifested between the religious/sacred and the worldly/profane.

Thus, much of the scholarship on the music of the blues draws a sharp line between the blues and the “spirituals” of the slaves. The seeming irreligiosity and blatantly this-worldly emphasis of the ex-slaves’ music led many to assume a secularization thesis to explain this ostensible transition from the slave songs to the ex-slaves’. That is, the religious worldview and identity of the slaves are argued to have slowly disintegrated following Emancipation until most blacks became completely “secular,” free from their Christian origins. To that effect, Levine writes: “Thus although it happened neither suddenly or completely, the sacred world view so central to black slaves was to be shattered in the twentieth century” (158). Consequently, many blues scholars like Oliver have claimed over reductively at times that the “blues is strictly secular in content” (*Blues Fell* 117). However, reductively bifurcating the identities and worldviews of pre- and post-antebellum blacks elides the interplay of the



sacred/religious and profane/worldly within the music of the ex-slaves. Although the blues seemingly focused much more on “this-worldly” or secular aspects of life than the songs of the slaves, the relationship between the two is undeniably symbiotic. As the title of James Cone’s work on the relationship between the music of slaves and ex-slaves implies, the blues must be taken as an extension and evolution of the slave songs, not as a complete break and departure from it. We must view them in tandem as the spirituals *and* the blues—not the spirituals *or/then* the blues.

To that point, Southern avers that a “dividing line between the blues and some kinds of spirituals cannot always be sharply drawn” (333). Although the emergence of the blues mark a clear demarcation between antebellum and postbellum black music and consciousness, slavery is nonetheless “the historical background out of which the blues were created” (*Spirituals and the Blues* 109). The blues “are closely related to the ‘slave seculars,’ the “non-religious, occasionally anti-religious” antebellum songs that “expressed the skepticism of black slaves who found it difficult to take seriously anything suggesting the religious faith of white preachers” (109). In the blues, this scope of skepticism becomes pointed inward, at the black community’s religious heritage, rather than solely at the obvious religious hypocrisy of white Christianity. Functionally and thematically, the slave songs and the blues share commonalities in certain areas. Like the communal, Signifyin(g) process of the slave songs, the later blues singers drew “upon songs that belong[ed] to the community repertory, borrowing from this one and that one, and refashioning the verses into a new song even as they [were] singing” (109). Similar to the slave songs’ African heritage, the blues “employs a range of tonal and rhythmic practices originating in West Africa” (Wald 5). As Wald succinctly summarizes: “Some of the most distinctive elements of what would come to be

known as blues can be traced to West Africa: common rhythms, instrumental techniques that were adapted by banjo players, fiddlers, and eventually guitarists, and a rich and varied range of singing styles” (12).

Indeed, if compared solely by their lyrics, many of the slave songs and blues become indistinguishable. The feelings of loneliness and desertion and the consequent comfort found in Jesus expressed in the slave songs—

Sometimes I feel like a motherless child, (thrice)

A long ways from home (twice) (Dett 172)

Go down in de lonesome valley,

Go down in de lonesome valley, my Lord;

Go down in de lonesome valley,

To meet my Jesus dere. (Allen, Ware, and Garrison 48)

Nobody knows de trouble I’ve had,

Nobody knows but Jesus,

Nobodys de trouble I’ve had (74-75)

—can be found almost exactly in some blues songs as well:

Well, I’m gonna run, I’m gonna run

I’m gonna run to the city of refuge (96)

Since me and Jesus got married, haven’t been a minute apart,

With the receiver in my hand, and religion in my heart...

Dying will be easy, dying will be easy, (twice)

Jesus gon' make up my [dying bed] (Sackheim 102)

Because of these similarities between the slave songs and the blues, some scholars have classified certain songs appropriately as “blues-spirituals” (Southern 333).

Additionally, like the authors of the slave songs, blues artists “often engaged Bible characters in casual, one-way conversations or connected the characters to their personal experiences” (Reed 43):

Oh Peter was preaching the gospel

He's standing with eleven men

I'll show you one that's in heaven

If you would just only come in (Sackheim 96)

Delilah was a woman fine and fair

Her pleasant looks, her coal black hair

Delilah gained old Samson's mind

A-first saw the woman that look so fine (100)

Norah [Noah], hist the windah [open the window] (thrice)

Hist the windah let the dove come in

Oh God comman' Brother Norah one day

Oh hist the windah let the dove come in (qtd in Reed 42)

Seem like I can hear; my good gal's voice in the air  
 Said daddy I have a man—; and you have no rights in there  
 Oh you ever get in jail; boy and you have no friends  
 Feel just like Daniel; when they throwed him in the lion's den  
 My good gal wrote a letter; how do you reckon it read  
 Come home little daddy; your father's might near dead  
 How can I come home baby; with these tall rock walls over my head  
 Know by that baby; got no one to hold my aching head  
 Oh where were you; when the clock struck five 'fore day  
 Down in that old foundry; trying to roll my cares away. (Reed 43)

Thus, within the blues, the Old and New Testament characters prevalent throughout the slave songs make appearances at times. Most fascinating from the selection of blues songs above is the transitional shift from the divided religious identity of the antebellum slave to the postbellum ex-slave we can see when comparing the first three songs to the fourth. Whereas the allusions to Peter, Samson and Delilah, and Noah adhere, for the most part, to the artistic use of biblical characters in the slave songs—each of these three examples employing Old and New Testament characters in order to provide some Christian principle or lesson—the fourth song's reference to Daniel marks a secular or non-religious use of biblical Christianity. Instead of alluding to the biblical story to speak of God's providence or salvation, as many of the slave songs did, the blues songwriter employs the themes of isolation and imprisonment in the story of Daniel in the lion's den to voice the loneliness of his incarceration and the pains of his romantic longings. Though seemingly a subtle difference from the slave songs, this re-appropriation of a biblical character for secular means illustrates both the Signification

upon (black) Christianity by bluesmen and women and the evolution of the slaves' divided religious identity that Signifyin(g) process entailed.

Therefore, while the blues ostensibly “depict the ‘secular’ dimension of black experience”—in contradistinction to the spirituality of the slave songs—they also undeniably interact with the “sacred” dimension of black experience as well (*Spirituals and Blues* 108). The key differences that do arise between the religious themes of the slave songs and the blues—as the above example of the secular use of a biblical character demonstrated—only serve to highlight the evolution of the slaves' divided religious identity in the ex-slaves' music:

Some people tell me that God takes care of old folks and fools, (twice)

But since I've been born he must have changed his rule.

I used to ask a question, then answer that question myself, (twice)

'Bout when I was born, wonder was there any more mercy left?...

You know, until six months ago I hadn't prayed a prayer since God know  
when (twice)

Now I'm asking God every day to please forgive me for my sin.

You know it must be the Devil I'm serving, I know it can't be Jesus Christ,

This must be the Devil I'm serving I know it can't be Jesus Christ

‘Cause I ask him to save me and look like he tryin’ to take my life. (Sackheim 120)

Absent within the slave songs’ unconditional trust in God and love for Jesus, the theodicies of many blues emphasize the changing relationship of freed blacks to the religion of the slaves. Because the end of slavery did not bring all the joys and *complete* freedom that African Americans thought it would, the hope of salvation in the slave songs became an unfulfilled hopelessness to many ex-slaves. The shocking, somewhat sacrilegious ending to the song above in which the blues singer questions whether it is the “Devil I’m serving” because the oppressions of life make it seem as if Jesus Christ “tryin’ to take my life” encapsulates to a large degree the transition of the divided religious identity of the slave to the ex-slave. Nevertheless, in that evolution of the slave songs, the blues never simply reject the religion of the slaves; rather, like the secular employment of biblical Christianity or the theodicies questioning God and Jesus’s goodness, they interrogate, re-contextualize, and reimagine it in response to their postbellum freedoms and subjugated realities.

What becomes manifest when broadly comparing the slave songs to the blues, then, is not the difference in style or aesthetics between the two—for both share the “same musical repertory and traditions”—but the “new forms of self-conception” that arise from the slave songs to the blues (Levine 221). Without a foundational understanding of the slaves’ divided religious identity and its Signification upon white hegemonic Christianity, we risk mistaking the secularity of the blues as a mere rejection of the sacred, rather than as an evolution and reimagining of the sacred world of the slaves. More than a totalizing rejection of or break from the slave songs, the blues of the ex-slaves illustrates how the changing contextual realities of post-Emancipation America resulted in a transition within the divided religious

identity of blacks as well. The conflict between white and black Christianity progressed to entail an inward conflict between black Christianity and black secularity.

This new internal conflict within the black community was illustrated through the very lives of many well-known blues singers. With the rise of gospels in the 1930s—the more obvious spiritual successor of the slave songs—many famous African-American singers found themselves caught between the religiosity of the church and the secularity of popular music. The “opposition that exist[ed] between the blues and the church often creat[ed] for bluesmen [and women] themselves an internal ambivalence in their own lives” (Aschoff 56). Many well-known blues singers—such as “Georgia Tom” Dorsey, Sara Martin, Virginia Liston, and Bertha Idaho—“eventually gave up the blues and were embraced by the church to which they devoted their talents as singers and composers” (*Blues Fell* 117). Similarly, it was not uncommon for others to pass between the two modes of music/being throughout their careers, as singers like Charles Patton, Blind Willie McTell, Barbecue Bob, and Blind Lemon would “record both religious songs as well as blues” (Levine 179). Though many bluesmen and women criticized the hypocrisy and self-righteousness of black Christianity, they “could not escape their own Christian indoctrination resulting from having been raised in the church and having received continued criticism from church folks regarding the blues being evil” (*Blues and Evil* 59). This internal crisis of many blues singers represent broadly the evolution of the slaves’ divided religious identity, from the double consciousness of white and black Christianity to black Christianity and black secularity. Yet, as Teresa Reed implies, the double consciousness of these bluesmen and women between their religious past and secular present did not represent a *rejection* of the religion of the slaves but the “two

utterances of a fresh and multifaceted African-American voice” that came to being after Emancipation—the “postbellum shift in black-American religious consciousness” (38-39).

Moreover, just as the divided religious identity of the slaves entailed a re-appropriation and re-signification of white hegemonic Christianity, the ex-slaves’ transition from the slaves’ divided religious self also resulted in a further re-signification and re-contextualization of black Christianity. In its Signification upon religion of the slaves, the blues evince a collapsing and fusing of the sacred/profane structure of (African-American) Christianity. Through its fusing of the sexual and sacred and parodying of the figure of the black preacher, the blues radically deconstructs the religion and music of the slaves. Whereas slaves Signified upon the hegemonic Christianity of their owners, re-appropriating and re-deploying the egalitarian and resistive potentialities and principles of biblical Christianity, ex-slaves Signified upon the Christianity of slaves itself in artistic acts of parodic revision and deconstructive play. As a revision of the ontological and socio-cultural function of Christianity for the slaves’ identity, the blues mark the changing conceptions of religion by many freed blacks. Though slaves’ re-signified in their re-appropriation of white Christianity the metaphysical/metaphorical significations attached to whiteness and blackness, they left intact the sacred/profane structure of Christianity. Conversely, ex-slaves deconstructed the sacred/profane realms of Christianity in their conflation of the sacred and sexually promiscuous/profane and parody of the former sacred position of the black preacher. In doing so, they emptied the signifiers of the sacred/profane of their previous, fixed meanings—a symbolic rending, if you will, of the Du Boisian/Old Testament veil separating the sacred from the profane.



Accordingly, in addition to illustrating the freedoms to explore romantic relationships post-Emancipation and the artistic creativity of ex-slaves in putting to music the vast dimensions of love and sexuality, the blues also reveal the ex-slaves' conflation or fusion of the sacred with the profane/sexually promiscuous. As Paul Oliver notes, throughout the blues, a "close relationship exists between religious and sexual ecstasy" (*Blues Fell This Morning* 101). More than a mere close relationship, however, the blues most significantly collapses the two realms of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity in a manner that marks the evolution of the postbellum divided religious identity. Thus, in certain songs that depict the romantic and sexual longings and heartbreaks of the postbellum African-American consciousness, the changing function and conception of religion from the slave to the ex-slave are also expressed. In Walter Davis's "Life Boat Blues," the bluesman's complicated relationship with his woman is compared to and conflated with the crucifixion of Jesus:

I put my babe on a life boat, and told her bye bye bye (twice)  
 And her eyes got full of water, and she began to cry  
 I tried to ship my baby, in some foreign distant land (twice)  
 But the way she looked at me people, I really don't think I can  
 Now if you'll be my baby, you can be my boat (twice)  
 And I will stick closer to you than Jesus did the cross  
 I love you baby, but I don't like the way you do (twice)  
 And the way you treat me, is coming right back to you.

Early in the song, Davis's use of the metaphor of the boat to describe his inability to decide whether he should remain in a romantic relationship with his partner appears to maintain the usual creativity and extended conceits of countless other blues songs. However, in the

culminating lines of the song, he quite dramatically breaks for a moment from the extended conceit of the boat and abruptly uses the (gruesome) imagery of Jesus's nailing to the cross to emphasize his passionate plea to his lover. Through his conflation of the closeness of sexual intimacy with the holy crucifixion of Jesus, Davis deconstructively plays with the sacred and profane signifiers of Christianity, effectively emptying them of their former significations. Such an artistic move evinces a Signification upon (black) Christianity that both re-signifies the salvific death of Jesus on the cross in a subversion of the slaves' religion and re-contextualizes Jesus's crucifixion to meet the freedoms and oppressive realities of postbellum American society.

Similarly, in "Blind" Willie McTell's "Brown Down Engine Blues," the realms of the sacred/religious and the profane/sexually promiscuous are collapsed:

Feel like a broke down engine: ain't got no driving-wheel  
 You ever been down and lonesome: you know how a poor man feels  
 I've been shooting craps and gambling: mama and I done got broke  
 I done pawned my pistol: mama and my best clothes in soak  
 I went down to my praying ground: and fell on bended knees  
 I ain't crying for no religion: Lordy give me back my good gal please  
 If you give me my baby: Lord I won't worry you no more (Taft 421)

In claiming not to cry "for no religion" and praying instead for "his good gal," the bluesman deconstructively empties the category and sign(ification) of Christianity and artistically plays with its signifiers of the sacred and profane in subversive ways. Much like Davis's "Life Boat Blues," sexual intimacy with a woman becomes fused with the orthodox function of religion, resulting, as the bluesman quips, in its re-signification and re-contextualization: "If

you give me my baby: Lord I won't worry you no more." And other songs—such as Peter Chatman's "Lend Me Your Love" in which the sexual love of a woman is conflated with the biblical image of "Noah's dove"—could be cited to show how blues singers, like Davis and McTell, illustrated the changing nature of the double consciousness of the postbellum African-American's religious identity.

Consequently, while scholars like Reed rightly observe that such blues songs emphasize "the emotional connection between sex and salvation in the mind of the blues artist," they also evince more significantly how the evolution of the ex-slaves' divided religious identity was characterized by a Signification upon the slaves' religion and a subversion of it (Reed 41). The implications of the blues fusion of the sexual and sacred would impact the later soul, funk, and R&B eras of black music. In the 1975 Bar-Kays song "Holy Ghost," for example, the love and sexual intimacy of a woman are conflated with the spiritual power and indwelling of the Holy Ghost:

Holy, Yeah, Yeah, Holy Ghost (refrain, repeat four times)

Girl, your love is like the Holy Ghost

Shakin' all in my bones

I've never felt such a feelin'

In all the days I've been born

Whenever I feel your presence, child

You seem to hypnotize my mind, well

Girl, your love is like the Holy Ghost  
 I feel like I've been born a second time

(Refrain)

Girl, your love is like the Holy Ghost  
 The antidote that frees my soul  
 And no cyclone could ever describe  
 this feelin' that sets my soul on fire  
 You put a runnin' in my walk  
 and you put a tremble in my talk  
 And this feelin' that I have within  
 Said it makes me feel like I've been born again.  
 Feel it, feel it,  
 feel the spirit. (Reed 31-32)

The Bar-Kays's conflation of the orgasmic, ejaculatory pleasures of sexual intimacy with biblical descriptions of the Holy Spirit's indwelling of believers contributes to the tradition of bluesmen and women who first deconstructed the sacred/profane structure of (black) Christianity. In the blues, therefore, we can see the beginnings of the radical transitions and shiftings of the postbellum black's divided religious identity whose influence permeated the music of blacks decades later to this very day.

Closely related to the blues' subversion of Christianity is its parodic Signification upon one of the most prominent figures of the slaves' religion: the black preacher. As a powerful figure within the religious community of slaves during the great revivals of the 1800s, the black preacher was the embodiment and realization, to a large extent, of the egalitarian

principles and potentiality of biblical, Protestant Christianity that the slaves sought to re-appropriate from the hegemony of white Christianity. In relation to the birth of a distinctly black Christianity from the oppression of white Christianity, the “understanding, interpretation, and adaption of the Christian tradition” by black preachers played a key factor in the slaves’ Signification upon their master’s version of Christianity (Alho 52). Granted the permission to preach to congregated slaves and, on certain occasions, even to poor, lower class whites, black preachers “laid the foundations for independent black churches” and “institutions that provided the core of free black communities” (Glaude, Jr. 57). Raboteau nicely summarizes:

The importance of...early black preachers in the conversion of slaves to Christianity has not been sufficiently appreciated. Emerging in the latter half of the eighteenth and the early decades of the nineteenth centuries, they acted as crucial mediators between Christian belief and the experiential world of the slaves. In effect they were helping to shape the development of a bicultural synthesis, an Afro-American culture by nurturing the birth of Christian communities among blacks, slave and free. (*Slave Religion* 136)

During the developmental stages of the slaves’ religion, then, black preachers served an important mediating role of shaping a “bicultural synthesis” between the paradoxical dichotomies of the slaves’ divided religious identity. In contradistinction to the Christianity and religious identity of white Americans, they epitomized the distinctiveness of the slaves’ Signification upon Christianity, representing for the black community as a whole a synthesis of the slaves’ paradoxical relationship with white Christianity. In other words, the figurehead of the black preacher perfectly represented the union of all the conflicting doubles upon

which the slaves' divided religious identity was founded upon. And by the "turn of the century," the powerful position of the black preacher and black church had increased to the point that they had "become the moral, social, and political focal point of African-American life" (Reed 50-51).

In their Significations upon the black preacher, consequently, bluesmen and women critiqued his status within the black community and, by extension, the function of the black church as well. As Gates delineates within his theory of an indigenous African-American literary criticism, black artists Signify upon the African-American artistic tradition through acts of repetition and revision or "repetition with a signal difference"—specifically, either by parody or pastiche (*The Signifying Monkey* xxiv). By Signifyin(g) upon the black preacher of black Christianity, therefore, blues artists "altere[d] fundamentally the way we read the [black preacher] tradition, by defining the relation of the text at hand [the blues music, in this case] to the tradition" (*The Signifying Money* 124). That is, in parodying the black preacher, blues artists revised his historical status and function within the tradition of African-American Christianity. Whereas he was "once so revered as to remain above scrutiny" within the black community, the black preacher "was often portrayed in blues lyrics as thoroughly human, fallible, and hypocritical" (Reed 51).

In addition to accusations of greed and overall hypocrisy, the blues parodied the figure of the black preacher most prominently by questioning his moral integrity and positing his engagement in sexual immorality:

If you want to hear a preacher curse  
 Take his bread sweet mama; and save him the crust  
 Sister in the corner; crying there's my man

Preacher comes to your house; you ask him to rest his hat  
 Next thing he want to know; sister where your husband at  
 Come in here Elder; and shut my door  
 Want you to preach for me the same text you did night before  
 See that preacher walking down the street  
 Fixin' to meddle with every sister he meets  
 Preacher, preacher you nice and kind  
 Better not catch you at that house of mine (Reed 51-21)

Though the song castigates the black preacher for his swearing and greed, the majority of the lyrics deal with his sexual impurity and seduction of the wives of the black congregation. As the line “Want you to preach for me the same text you did night before” suggests, the black preacher’s trysts with the women of his church is depicted as a common and reoccurring act. The warning from the bluesman in the final line expresses the growing discontentments and suspicions of blacks towards the place of the black church and preacher in the postbellum black community. As Reed observes, the threat to the black preacher both speaks to the history of male slaves’ being in a “perpetual state of hopeless rivalry with white men” in relation to any sort of romantic relationship with black female slaves and “suggests that the black man now has a new rival, this time within his own community and in the form of the popular, charismatic preacher” (52).

Similarly, a song by Kid Wesley Wilson in 1920 exposes what he saw as the hypocrisy and sexual impurity of the black church and preacher:

Going to take my gal; to a social dance  
 But I didn't have no seat; in my pants

Give me four dollars; take me in  
 I took the four dollars; and I bought some gin  
 I tore my hair; and I walked the streets  
 I wanted to whip; everyone I meet  
 Along came John; who's my best friend  
 Cut his head; till it was a sin  
 I shot some craps; to my disgrace  
 I run everybody; out the place  
 Dice was loaded; made me sore  
 I left four hustlers; lying on the floor  
 I went to church; to do the holly roll  
 Grabbed me a sister; to convert her soul  
 Two minutes later; preacher came in  
 She stopped rollin' with me; started rollin' with him (Taft 714).

Demonstrating the blues' artistic fusion of the sexual and sacred, the pairing of the phrases "holly roll"—a play off of the sexually imaginative "jelly roll"—and "convert her soul" exposes the supposed sexual immorality of the black preacher. In the blues' Signification upon the religion of the slaves, then, the evolutionary transition of the divided religious identity of postbellum blacks was evinced in the deconstructive play of the sacred and profane signifiers of black Christianity and the parodying of its most prominent, earthly figure—the black preacher.

Furthermore, as Gates's theory avers, the Signifyin(g) process not only revises the way we read the black literary tradition, it also serves to "clear a space" for the black artist within



that same tradition (*The Signifying Monkey* 124). In that regard, the bluesmen and women's Signification upon the black preacher does not end with its parodying of his status and moral character but also entails the creation of an artistic space for the self-proclaimed "blues preacher." The diametrical opposite to the traditional black preacher, the blues preacher blended the sacred and secular realms into one hybrid figure, as seen in Son House's "Preachin' the Blues." In the first half of the song, House bemoans the insufficiencies of the black church and preacher for the postbellum realities of African Americans by juxtaposing the "Baptist Preacher" to the blues preacher:

Oh, I'm gonna get me a religion; I'm gonna join the Baptist Church, (twice)

I'm gonna be a Baptist Preacher; and I sure won't have to work.

Oh I'm gonna preach these blues and—and I want everybody to shout...

Oh, in my room, I bowed down to pray:

Then the blues came 'long and they blowed my spirit away.

Oh, I have religion on this very day:

But the womens and whiskey, well they would not let me pray.

Oh—I wish I had me a heaven of my own (Great God almighty)...

Well, I'd give all my women a long long happy home.

Well, I love my baby just like I love myself (twice)

Well, if she don't have me, she won't have nobody else (Sackheim 212-213)

In the song, the freedoms of "womens and whiskey" afforded to blacks after Emancipation conflict with the singers' initial plans to "get me a religion," "join the Baptist," and "be a Baptist Preacher." However, in a line alluding to the passage in the New Testament book of Acts when the apostles first receive the life-changing presence and indwelling of the Holy

Spirit, the blues eventually “came ‘along” and “blowed my spirit away.” In keeping with the analysis of the blues’ fusion of the sacred and sexual discussed so far, the preaching and religion of the blues focus primarily on the singer’s sexual intimacy with women, as seen in his desire to create “a heaven of my own” so that he can “ give all my women a long long happy home” (213).

Accordingly, in the second half of the song, House rejoices in his new position as a blues preacher and its accommodation of his sexual desires:

Well, I’m gonna fold my arms; I’m gonna kneel down in prayer,  
 Oh, I’m gonna fold my arms, gonna kneel down in prayer;  
 When I get up I’m gonna see if my preaching suit a man’s ear  
 Well, I met the blues this morning, walking just like a man...  
 I said, Good morning blues, now give me your right hand.  
 Now there’s nothing now baby; Lord, that’s gonna worry my mind...  
 Oh, to satisfy I got the longest line.  
 Oh, I got to stay on the job; I ain’t got no time to lose...  
 I swear to God I’ve got to preach these gospel blues (Great God almighty)  
 Oh—I’m gonna preach these blues and choose my seat and set down (twice)  
 When the spirit comes, sisters, I want you to jump straight up and down. (213)

The personification of the blues as “a man” and the conversion experience that follows the singer’s meeting him seems to identify him as some salvific figure, perhaps even Christ-like. The well-known motif of walking with Jesus or God would appear to corroborate such a reading. Regardless, after taking the personified blue’s “right hand,” the singer is inaugurated, so to speak, in his position as the blues preacher who no longer has anything

“that’s gonna worry my mind.” As the blues preacher, the singer’s message of “gospel blues” entails a strongly implied, somewhat comical sexual commitment to the women of his congregation (“to satisfy I got the longest line”) (213). Reed provides helpful insight in suggesting that “gospel blues” could also be seen as a “satirical reference” to the gospel blues of Thomas Dorsey who combined the sound of the blues with the lyrics of gospel music (Reed 57). As opposed to the compromise of style and content in Dorsey’s music, House’s gospel blues marks a complete fusion of the sacred/religious with the profane/sexually promiscuous. The final line solidifies the status of the blues preacher as an evolution of the traditional black preacher in its conflation of Christianity’s Holy Spirit with the sexual ecstasy of the blues “spirit.”

Thus, the full significance of the blues’ parody of the black preacher can only be comprehended when studied in conjunction with the artistic and socio-cultural space made for the blues preacher. As an evolution of the black preacher, the blues preacher is characterized by his or her conflation of the sexual and the sacred. Levine writes: “Blues was threatening because its spokesmen and its ritual too frequently provided the expressive communal channels of relief that had been largely the province of religion in the past. Blues successfully blended the sacred and the secular” (237). Nevertheless, while some scholars like Levine have noted the apparent religiosity of the figure of the blues preacher and its conflation of the sacred and profane, they generally tend to neglect how the blues deconstruct the sacred/profane structure of Christianity in its Signification upon the religion of the slaves. Most scholars have either posited the religious aspect of the blues/blues preacher as proof of its continuance of the same religiosity of the slave songs or rationalized the blending of the sacred and profane in the blues by overemphasizing, I would argue, the influence of the

postbellum black's West African religious heritage. To that effect, James Cone's analysis of the relationship between the blues preacher and the black preacher elides the evolution of the blues preacher from the latter: "The 'new priests' of the black community were the blues men and women...like the preacher in the church, they proclaimed the Word of black existence, depicting its joy and sorrow, love and hate, and the awesome burden of being 'free' in a racist society when one is black" (*Spirituals and the Blues* 114). While Cone astutely recognizes the lineage and connection between the religion of the slaves to the blues of the ex-slaves that scholars up to then largely ignored, his analysis of the blues preacher is given through the lens of a substantivist conception of religion which neglects the artistic interplay of the sacred and profane that occurs in the blues. As he writes soon after: "The affirmation of self in the blues is the emphasis that connects them theologically with the spirituals. Like the spirituals, the blues affirm the somebodiness of black people, and they preserve the worth of black humanity through ritual and drama" (117). In his attempts to draw a theological connection between the blues and slave songs through their ontological assertions of ante- and postbellum black life, then, Cone conflates the religiosity of the blues with the slave songs, thereby overlooking the deconstructive ways in which the blues signify upon the slave songs. Hence, Cone ignores the signifyin(g) relationship between the two and the evolutionary shift in the conceptions of religion from the slave to the ex-slave that artistic process evinces.

Moreover, in John Michael Spencer's and Teresa Reed's studies of the religiosity of the blues, the blending of the sacred and profane in the songs is interpreted through a West African cultural framework. Spencer writes: "Given the synchronous duplicity or holistic tenacity of African-American culture, the blues singer is one of many African-American

personages that fits within the personality scheme of the trickster and that shows the blues to be a symbol of black cultural and ontological reality” (*Blues and Evil* xxvi). In the same vein, Reed writes of the figure of the blues preacher/singer:

This simultaneous call to preaching the gospel and singing the blues underscores a uniquely African-American approach to the sacred/secular dichotomy. In this approach, the sacred and the secular, while separate in theory, are frequently combined in practice. Where strict separation between sacred and secular is valued, the preacher who both proclaims the gospel and sings the blues is a troublesome anomaly. The apparent contradiction in this dual identity may not be a contradiction at all but rather two different facets of a single cultural function, perhaps traceable to the *griot* of West Africa. (114)

While West African cultural retentions—or “Africanisms”—are undoubtedly present within the slave songs and the blues, Spencer and Reed conflate function and content in their analysis of the blending of the sacred and profane within the latter music. As discussed in the previous chapter, although the function of the religion and music of the slaves do evince some cultural practices of their West African heritage, the content of the slaves’ religion/music was Christian in theology and content. Raboteau states concerning the syncretism of the slaves’ religion:

Despite the African style of singing, the spirituals, like the ‘running spirituals’ or ring shout, were performed in praise of the Christian God. The names and words of the African gods were replaced by biblical figures and Christian imagery. African style and European hymnody met and became in the spiritual a new,

Afro-American song to express the joys and sorrows of the religion which the slaves had made their own. (“Death of the Gods” 265)

Consequently, the same could be said of the West African influence upon the blues. Though the blues may have functional characteristics of the ex-slaves’ indigenous past, the religious aspects of the songs indisputably mark a clear Signification upon Christianity—the religion of the slaves—and not the West African gods of Esu, the Signifying Monkey, or the griot. Rather than view the blues conflation of the sacred and the profane as an indication of the ex-slaves’ West African cultural heritage, therefore, I argue that we interpret the artistic deconstruction of Christianity by bluesmen and women within the framework and black tradition of Signifyin(g). In doing so, we gain a fuller understanding of the blues deconstructive interplay of the sacred and profane signifiers of Christianity and its relation to the religion of the slaves. Furthermore, we also gain a viewpoint of how the postbellum slaves’ divided religious identity evolved from that of the slaves.

Finally, when interpreting the religiosity of the blues in relation to its Signification upon the religion and music of the slaves, we see that the historical double consciousness of African Americans never simply amounted to a strict bifurcation or clean division between two conflicting identities—more significantly, it entailed the collisions between the two and the existential, ontological hybrids that resulted at these sites of conflict. Therefore, at all levels and dimensions of the African American’s history of double consciousness explored so far in this study—human-citizen/animal-property-slave, Christian/savage, white Christianity/black Christianity, African/African American, African American/white American, black Christianity/black secularity, spirituals/blues—what is most important is the *striving* and *warring* between the two halves that forge together to formulate one, divided

self. And in that forging of conflicting doubles, certain deconstructive and paradoxical hybridizations, fusions, and confluences inevitably occur. Accordingly, in the music of the blues, we can see a fusion of and interplay between the sacred/profane structure of African-American Christianity as a result of the ex-slaves' Signification upon the religion of the slaves. Though the blues may not have always been seen as a "source of information about black religious thought," when analyzed and "taken collectively," they "convey a powerful message about the role of religion in the black-American consciousness during the early decades of the twentieth century" (Reed 60). At its most basic level, the transition from the slaves' divided religious identity to the ex-slaves' can be seen as a shift from a substantivist conception of religion to a functionalist one in its interplay between the previously bifurcated realms of Christianity's sacred and profane structure. The blues, then, might be seen in some ways as a deconstruction of the religion of the slave songs, a transition from the battle between slaves and white society over biblical Christianity to a conflict *within* the sacred and profane nature of African-American Christianity.

### **Chapter 5: W.E.B. Du Bois, the Harlem Renaissance and the Lynched Black Christ**

The ethos of the blues and its artistic individualism would eventually culminate in the literary boom of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s. Following Emancipation, there was a “direct relationship between the national ideological emphasis upon the individual, the popularity of Booker T. Washington’s teachings, and the rise of the blues” (Levine 223). The decentralization and subsequent migration of the black population to the North and, for some, further South forced white America to reckon with the assimilation of millions of blacks into its society. For the newly freed African Americans, “never before in their experience had they been subjected to more exhortation and inducement to change individually, to embrace new models, to think along new lines, to turn their backs on the past and the traditional ways of thought and action” (144). African Americans were faced with the challenge of showing themselves worthy and equal to the status of white Americans through the development of their own talents and capabilities (144). After the failure of Reconstruction and its complete disenfranchisement of ex-slaves, Booker T. Washington’s “separate but equal” message offered a solution to the problem of black assimilation into white society through the “idea of segregation” (L. Jones 53). By “advocat[ing] that Negroes learn trades rather than go into any of the more ambitious professions,” Washington proffered to the mainstream black society a model of segregated co-existence within white society (53).

Concomitant to Washington’s impactful message of segregation to millions of blacks post-Reconstruction was the simultaneous rise of a “black bourgeoisie” who sought to



assimilate within white society conversely by “swallow[ing] the socio-economic concepts of their white upper-class models” (L. Jones 54). To that effect, Baraka contends that the “Civil War and the Emancipation served to create for the first time among Negroes a separate meta-society, one whose members strove to emulate exactly the white society” (54). The two models of emulation and segregation “caused a split in the psychical disposition of the Negro’s temperament,” resulting in the divergence of the “developing middle class and the mainstream of black society” (58). The music of the blues, therefore, reflected the competing, conflicting struggles of blacks in their “peculiar position” of “adapt[ing] to” and “adopt[ing] of” American society and its principles (66).

However, by the 1920s, spurred by the mass migrations of blacks to the North and the transformation of “the core of the Negro population from farm workers into a kind of urban proletariat,” a “great change...took place among Negro artists and intellectuals” (L. Jones 133). Led by the voice and writings of Du Bois and his call for complete acceptance into and equality with white society, a new generation of black artists began striving to redefine for America what it mean to be a black American. With the shift in black leadership at the turn of the century from the “accommodationist policy” of Washington to the “radical protests” of Du Bois, “African Americans became racially conscious and self-assertive, affirmed their humanity, and demanded respect” (Mitchell 2). No longer satisfied with the former models of segregation or emulation, the still emerging middle class of African Americans now sought to prove their worth through—amongst other professions—their literary, poetic, and musical talent. Finding a central location in New York, Harlem during the 1920s became “synonymous with the spirit of change developing in African American life,” the era named after it “represent[ing] a period of burgeoning creativity and self-reflection in African

American art and literature” (2). Indeed, as an “artistic, cultural, and social journey of self-discovery,” the importance of this time for African Americans cannot be overstated (Mitchell 2).

Key to the endeavour of black artists to prove through “creative expressions” their ability “to participate in American life and to contribute to American culture” was their attempts to create the “New Negro.” In response to the continued perpetuance of antebellum racist stereotypes—notably, the caricatures of blacks as rapacious savages desiring to devour white women—black artists sought to define for themselves their blackness outside the gaze of white America. William Stanley Braithwaite writes concerning the mindset of the black artists during the Harlem Renaissance towards the history of racist portrayals in American society:

Antebellum literature imposed the distortions of moralistic controversy and made the Negro a wax-figure of the marketplace: postbellum literature retaliated with the condescending reactions of sentiment and caricature, and made the Negro a *genre* stereotype. Sustained, serious or deep study of Negro life and character has thus been entirely below the horizons of our national art.

(32)

As the “laboratory of a great race-welding,” then, Harlem symbolized more than anything a place where “Negro life [was] seizing upon its first chances for group expression and self-determination” (Locke 24). In short, as Alain Locke powerfully asserts, black artists strove to make the “American mind...reckon with a fundamentally changed Negro” (25). Hence, in opposition to the post-Reconstruction, burgeoning black middle class that sought to emulate white society—whom Langston Hughes deridingly termed “the Nordicized Negro

intelligentsia”—the generation of African Americans during this time reclaimed their blackness (“The Negro Artist” 58). Hughes’s famous manifesto powerfully captures the goals of black artists of the 1920s:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn’t matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn’t matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (59)

In their subversive creations and employments of art, furthermore, the legacy of blues manifested itself in the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Ostensibly, as Elijah Wald notes, the “younger poets” of the period “were beginning to claim the blues as part of their poetic heritage,” with Hughes’s own “first major success with a poem”—“The Weary Blues”—being about his experiences as a child hearing the blues (112). In that sense, the artistic individualism and ethos of the blues heavily influenced the equally individualistic endeavours of African Americans during the era to bring forth the first “great Negro novelist” (Braithwaite 43). Most significantly, however, the influence of the blues on the new generation of black writers, poets, and painters manifested itself in the Signification upon Christianity seen in the literature and art of the Harlem Renaissance era. The subversive and resistive potentiality within art employed by the creators of the slave songs and the blues was re-deployed by black artists of the 1920s. As Du Bois claimed forthrightly concerning the “Criteria of Negro Art:” “...all Art is propaganda and ever must be” (66). Accordingly, just

as bluesmen and women evinced the postbellum evolution of the divided black religious identity in their deconstruction of the sacred/profane structure of (black) Christianity, black artists of the Harlem Renaissance signaled their attempts to (re)create the “New Negro” in their subversive, deconstructive portrayals of Jesus as a black lynched victim. By equating Jesus with the thousands of blacks lynched during the Reconstruction era and beyond, African American artists such as Hughes, Du Bois, and Countee Cullen fundamentally reconfigured the slaves’ relationship *with* Jesus by identifying blacks *as* Jesus. In doing so, the figure of Jesus became for them an artistic medium in which to expose the hypocrisy of white Christianity—and its figurehead of a white Jesus—and redeem the physical blackness of African Americans.

In re-entering the battle over the body of Christ, therefore, black artists of the Harlem Renaissance fought over the whitewashing of Jesus that occurred in America around the early decades of the nineteenth century. The whitening of Jesus can be traceable to the Jacksonian South when the signifier and marker of whiteness became “the standard measure of citizenship” (L. Ford 150). As Lacey Ford writes, during the early decades of the republic, the conflicting debates over race and slavery led to American citizenship lying no longer in “the ownership of productive property” but “simply on ‘whiteness’” (150). Whether in the “exclusionist” solution to slavery that proposed the whitening of American society “by reducing the size and diminishing the importance of the region’s African-American population” or the “subordination” solution that “recognized that the southern staple economy depended so heavily on slave labor” and therefore “accepted racially justified slavery as a necessary labor system,” “racial modernism in the Jacksonian South” in totality was “forbidding to blacks and supportive of white supremacy in some form” (137; 139; 150).

The meanings of capital, currency, and citizenship embedded within whiteness, moreover, would survive post-Emancipation. Ford explains:

Thus the triumph of whiteness allocated valuable privileges, including voting and legal equality, solely on the basis of skin color, or at least on the cultural perceptions and definitions of skin color, leaving race rather than class the key social divide in the public realm. And that sense of white racial entitlement has proven tenacious indeed, surviving not only the collapse of slavery in the 1860s, but also (albeit in altered and sometimes disguised form) the dismantling of segregation a century later. (150)

When the “white American Jesus first rose to power and prominence in the early nineteenth century,” consequently, his color entailed a divine sanctification of whiteness as the emblem of citizenship and supremacy over blackness (Blum and Harvey 9). As Edward Blum and Paul Harvey trace in their excellent study *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (2012), the story of how Jesus was whitewashed in US history entails a fascinating narrative of racial conflict over and strategic (re)appropriations of the body of Christ. In early colonial America, no dominant portrayals of Jesus had yet existed. The strict Puritan obedience to the second commandment forbidding idolatry—“You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above...”—meant the destruction of any images of God or Jesus (Exod. 20:4). In contrast to the Franciscans and Jesuits, “colonial Puritans thought that the Catholic representations [of Jesus] violated the second of the Ten Commandments,” “consider[ing] it blasphemous to depict Jesus visually” (40). To that effect, early American poetry and firsthand accounts of

purported visions of Jesus all depicted him in terms of a blinding light rather than physical whiteness (42-54).

It was not until the 1830s that images of a white Jesus began permeating American society. The large impact of the “visions” of Joseph Smith—the self-proclaimed prophet and founder of Mormonism—of a Jesus with “light complexion [and] blue eyes” coupled with the publishing houses of Protestant organizations like The American Bible Society, the American Sunday School Union, and the American Tract Society worked together to make the physically white Jesus a mainstream phenomenon (qtd. in Blum and Harvey 77). Because the theology of Smith’s church, with its mythology concerning dark Lamanites and light Nephites, “privileged whiteness as a marker of sacred inclusion and damned blackness as a marker of sacred exclusion,” their first printed images of Christ made sure to depict him as a “white man with dark hair and clear blue eyes” (85). At the same time, an increased emphasis put upon evangelistic outreach to American society led to a mass-production, marketing, and distribution of white Jesus images. As “innovative pioneers in printing, marketing, and using visual engravings and woodcuts,” these Protestant organizations were highly effective in propagating visuals of the white Jesus to millions of Americans, aiming to target most of all “the young and impressionable” (80). The birth and immense acceptance of Jesus as a white man were so profound that by the late 1830s, artist Rembrandt Peale told fledgling painters that the “Publius Lentulus” letter—a forged letter written “somewhere between the tenth and the fourteenth centuries” falsely claiming to come from a “governor of Judea during Christ’s lifetime” and containing a depiction of Jesus as the well-known, long-haired “hippie” figure—was a “true portrait of Christ,” even though the letter had been known for centuries to be fake (20-21; 83). And, as Blum and Harvey summarize, “By the time Americans

entered World War I, Christ's whiteness had been profoundly reshaped by the destruction of chattel slavery, the industrial revolution, immigration shifts, and the rise of segregation and imperialism. He had become an emblem of white supremacy..." (162).

Though Blum and Harvey discuss how black slaves attempted to re-appropriate the figures of Jesus as a white man by depicting him in visions as a "little man" who sided with the slaves (much like the trickster figures of West African folklore), the religion of the slaves, as discussed in the first chapter, was primarily focused on a re-signification of the symbolic meanings attached to blackness and re-appropriation of his egalitarian principles, and not the actual color of Christ himself (100-101). Therefore, whereas slaves re-signified the sacred/profane symbolism attached to metaphysical/metaphorical conceptions of whiteness and blackness in their identification with Jesus, the artists of the Harlem Renaissance fought over the *physical* conceptions of whiteness and blackness in their re-imagining of Jesus's ethnicity. In the dramatic presentations of black lynched victims as Christ figures, then, black artists of the 1920s signified upon the religion of the slaves, re-contextualizing the former slaves' paradoxical (re)appropriation of the religion of their masters by exposing the problems and hypocrisy of a physically white Jesus. Furthermore, their decision to make Jesus physically black involved a re-signification of the sacred/profane structure of Christianity: in the attribution of the "profaneness" of their black skin to the sacred whitewashed Jesus of mainstream culture, black artists collapsed the sacred/profane meanings attributed to constructions of physical blackness/whiteness, thus subverting the Christianity of white America and the system of lynching it engendered. To understand the subversive power behind the artistic depictions of Jesus as a black lynched victim, consequently, we must turn to the system of lynching itself that haunted African Americans

post-Emancipation. It is only by first studying the socio-cultural, symbolic/religious, and ritualistic functions that lynching served for white American society that we can understand the depth and dimensions of these subversive depictions by black artists of the era.

As many scholars have explored, following the abolition of slavery, white Americans attempted to re-construct the hierarchical relationship between blacks and whites through the mass lynchings of African Americans. With the end of slavery and its positioning of blacks within the liminality of social death, white society needed “other rituals of reference” that would fulfill the socio-cultural functions of the auction block and the master-slave relationship (*Terror and Triumph* 52). Anthony Pinn writes: “North America was forced to rethink the relationship between blacks and whites. The sociopolitical, economic, religious, and overall cultural self-understanding of whites had been based for centuries on the dehumanization of blacks” (53). Hence, during Reconstruction legislative “Black Codes” were enacted which restricted the mobility of blacks, severely limited their ability to “secure land and other economic resources,” imposed “maintenance” fines upon them for “improper gestures and conversation in the presence of whites,” and overall served to “return [them] to their former status” by route of disenfranchisement (50). With the failure of Reconstruction in 1877, a “massive action to restore the basic social order” of the Old South began, as evidenced in the continued denial of political and economic avenues for blacks (50). Most notably, lynching was systematically introduced into American society as a regulatory apparatus against African Americans.

Though lynching as a form of community punishment probably existed as far back as the 1760s in American history—becoming known officially as “Lynch’s Law” by 1818—its early form and use was nothing like the systematic lynching of thousands of blacks from the



1880s to the 1960s. Used initially as more of a measure against the absence or corruption of local authorities, lynchings in antebellum society were forms of swift justice where better forms of legal punishment were not available. As opposed to the later mutilations, torture, and burning of blacks, they did not always entail death by hanging; rather, lynchings were generally characterized by whipping, tarring and feathering, or exile from the community. Indeed, because of the almost omniscient and omnipotent surveillance and control of slavery over blacks before the Civil War, criminal whites were generally the target of lynchings in antebellum America. What few occasions there were of blacks being lynched were usually based on charges of insurrection—perhaps a tragic irony when considering the justification of lynching in postbellum society over that same antebellum caricature of blacks as savage, uncontrollable beasts. Thus, the brutal methods and sheer number of lynched blacks following Reconstruction mark it as fundamentally different than all previous forms of lynching up until then (*Rituals of Blood* 176; *Terror and Triumph* 60-63). The lynching system that killed up to “5,000 blacks between the end of the Civil War and 1968” served as an extra-legal means by which to regulate blacks, replace and reinforce the socio-cultural functions once fulfilled in the master-slave relationship, symbolically and religiously reap vengeance upon blacks for the dissolution of the Old South, and ritualistically scapegoat and displace the internal violence of the divided white nation upon blacks (*Rituals of Blood* 173).

Socio-culturally, the lynching of blacks was based on the perpetuation of the stereotype of African Americans as inhuman savages that was employed during the antebellum period to justify slavery. In the same manner the savage stereotype was employed in antebellum America as propagandistic tool to spread fear concerning the possibilities of slave insurrections, the portrayals of blacks as licentious animals served to justify the lynching of

African Americans. Through negrophobic writings like Charles Carroll's *The Negro: A Beast, or In the Image of God?* (1900) and Thomas Dixon's trilogy *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* (1902), *The Clansman: An Historical romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), and *The Traitor: A Story of the Fall of the Invisible Empire* (1907) — all of which would serve as the basis for D. W. Griffith's notorious, propagandistic film adaption *Birth of a Nation* (1915)—blacks were portrayed as licentious, soulless animals who sought to destroy the already tenuous, post-Civil War fabric of white American society. In *The Negro: A Beast* Carroll “stated unequivocally that the Bible, history, and science proved that ‘Negroes’ were ‘beasts’ who lacked ‘souls’,” and in his Klansman novels Dixon likewise preyed upon the continued influence of antebellum stereotypes within the fragile American mind by presenting “the image of the Afro-American male as a sexual monster, always on the alert to consume Euro-American women” (Blum 62; *Rituals of Blood* 213). Both authors can be seen as contributing to the historical lineage of racist sentiments towards and caricatures of blacks traceable to the first English contact with Africans. Carroll's religious and pseudo-scientific rationalizations of blacks as soulless creatures aligns with the pre-antebellum appropriations of Scripture and supposed anthropological findings of Africans as cursed, black slaves and simian-like creatures; likewise, Dixon's fear-mongering about a world where wild black savages overturned the social hierarchy is nothing more than the logical, postbellum actualization of antebellum fears about slave insurrections.

Parallel to these stereotypes of blacks as licentious savages was the perpetuance of the antebellum stereotype of the southern belle as a symbol of the (Old) South. Hence, by casting white women as helpless victims to the rapacious, animalistic instincts of black men, white supremacists sought to re-establish the order of the antebellum society. In addition to the

inflammatory works of fiction by Dixon, purported health officials like Dr. William Lee Howard revitalized the antebellum fears of miscegenation between white women and black men. In a article published in 1903 in the academic journal *Medicine*, Howard claimed that the supposed “attacks [by black men] on defenseless white women are evidence of racial instincts that are about as amenable to ethical culture as is the inherent odor of the race,” a sentiment implied practically in the exact same manner by Edward Topsell centuries earlier (qtd. in *Terror and Triumph* 63). It comes as no surprise, then, that the primary causes recorded for the lynching of blacks were accusations of murder and/or (attempted) rape. The very brutality of genital mutilation and castration that occurred in many lynchings confirms the fears white southern men had over the prospect of sexual intimacy between black men and white women (*Rituals of Blood* 175; 179). By castrating the black lynched male, white male perpetrators symbolically denied them any semblance of manhood—yet another reification of an antebellum stereotype where black males, as discussed in the first chapter, served as an emasculated caricature young white males could conversely base their own hierarchal, masculine roles in society off of.

The fundamental reality underlying the claims of white lynchers concerning the sexual deviance of black males for innocent white women, then, was the need to re-create and re-establish the socio-cultural binaries or dichotomies upon which the antebellum white American identity was founded upon. Amidst the identity crisis many whites faced following the abolition of the master-slave relationship, systematic lynching—with the antebellum racist sentiments and stereotypes that drove and justified it—offered the white American individual and society at large a means to reassert their dominance over blacks. As an apparatus of psychological fear, the hanging of black lynched victims acted as a powerful

reminder to freed blacks that the end of slavery did not necessitate white acceptance of their humanity. Consequently, what the negrophobic writings of Carroll, Dixon, and Howard fundamentally reveal are the postbellum attempts to *reconstruct* the antebellum binaries of human/beast-object and white Christian/black savage-heathen formerly constructed by the institution of slavery. Therefore, although the dichotomy of master-slave was abolished, the lynching of blacks worked to re-establish functionally similar relationships of neo-slavery between whites and blacks. In the “barbecues” that followed many lynchings in which body parts from the mutilated, burnt lynched victim were sold to bystanders, the bodies of blacks once again became the same commodified objects of the slave auction block. As Pinn writes: “...lynchings, like earlier slave auctions, served as a festive drama or regularized celebration, a mechanism of terror, a ‘feast of blood, or ritualized killing in communal acts of human sacrifice,’ so to speak, by which whites sought to maintain their control over blacks and keep them as instruments of whites’ pleasure and purpose” (*Terror and Triumph* 72). Gone was the auction block, only to be replaced by the lynching rope.

Closely tied with the perpetuance of these stereotypes behind the systematic lynching of blacks was the birth of a white supremacist theology in the South following the devastating defeat of the Civil War—specifically, the Lost Cause movement. Originating in the united, pro-slavery efforts of the southern churches in response to the growing diversification of northern churches during the antebellum period, the religion of the Lost Cause met the cultural and religious problems the South faced after the war: “the problems of providing meaning to life and society amid the baffling failure of fundamental beliefs, offering comfort to those suffering poverty and disillusionment, and encouraging a sense of belonging in the shattered southern community” (Wilson 220). Through its self-constructed

mythologies, rituals, and organizations, the Lost Cause movement met the “spiritual and psychological need for southerners to reaffirm their identity” (238). In comparison to the mythology of the American civil religion that privileged Americans as God’s chosen people following the Revolutionary War—as discussed in the second chapter concerning the black and white (re)appropriations of the Exodus narrative—the mythos of the Lost Cause was a creation myth predicated solely on the birth Confederacy and its battle of good and evil against the North during the Civil War (223). As such, its mythology was characterized by an enshrinement of prominent southern heroes such as Robert. E. Lee and Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson. Notably, the story of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection was at the “sacred center” of the religion of the Lost Cause; consequently, with the loss of the Civil War and the seeming death of the Old South, the Lost Cause was left with the task of rebuilding and resurrecting, so to speak, the South from its crumbles (223).

In the white supremacist theology of the Lost Cause post-Emancipation, therefore, the system of lynching served for many southern whites as a sort of atonement for the loss of the war. As evidenced in the writings of Dixon and Carroll, because blacks were depicted as nothing more than savage creatures, they seemed the perfect animal sacrifice to right the wrongs of the Civil War. Other writings of postbellum white supremacist theology like Buckner H. Payne’s *The Negro: What Is His Ethnological Status?* (1867) and G. C. H. Hasskarl’s “*The Missing Link?*” or *the Negro’s Ethnological Status* (1898) similarly reinforced the dehumanization of blacks to the point of complete socio-cultural, anthropological, and spiritual degradation. Both sought to position blacks outside the reach of God’s plan of salvation in the sacrificial death of Christ. Payne effectively whitewashed all of the well-known biblical characters—from Adam to Moses to Christ—and positioned

“Adam’s [white] race” as the only one meant “to be regenerated and redeemed,” and Hasskarl likewise renounced all missionary outreaches to Africa, linking the African people to the kingdom of Satan (qtd in Blum 71; 72). Dixon’s works in particular targeted African Americans as the sole cause of the South’s defeat to the North and all the subsequent problems during Reconstruction. His writings notably reified the connection between the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan and the Lost Cause movement. Though we may question the extent of the cultural impact and reach of such works in the mainstream postbellum society, there is “ample proof that they were widely read and culturally influential,” as Carroll’s *The Negro: A Beast* was purported by the editor of the *South Atlantic Quarterly* as being widely popular among white southern Americans (73). Blum states: “By the beginning of the twentieth century, the white supremacist theology of Dixon, Carroll, and others had penetrated deeply into the religious, social, and literary imagination of white Americans” (75).

Consequently, in many of the lynchings of blacks, as scholars like Patterson and Pinn have noted, a sacred, religious mythos was constructed around the entire, ghastly event by white Americans in attendance. In addition to the frequency of southern church leaders and preachers who were heavily involved in the process of lynchings—Sunday being a common day to enact a lynching—the extraordinarily sadistic nature of a large number of lynchings marked them as something of a communal, religious spectacle. One Massachusetts weekly editorial describes in April, 1899:

The nation and the whole civilized world must stand aghast at the revelation. A civilized community numbering thousands, at the drop of a hat, throws off the restraints and effects of many centuries of progress and stands forth in the

naked savagery of the primitive man. Men and women cheer and express feelings of triumph and joy as the victim is hurried on to the stake to make a Sunday holiday in one of the most orthodox religious communities in the United States. They cut off his ears, his fingers and other members of his body, and strip him and pour oil upon him while the spectators crowd desperately for positions of advantage in the great work of torture and death.

(qtd. in *Rituals of Blood* 188)

Interpreted through the white supremacist theology examined so far, this account of a brutal lynching that took place “in one of the most orthodox religious communities in the United States” reveals the sacred mythos constructed by many white Americans around the rebuilding of the (Old) South through the sacrificial atonement of black blood (qtd. in *Rituals of Blood* 188). As a veritable religious celebration of “triumph and joy” by men and women (and probably children) at the sight of the victim’s torture, mutilation, and burning at the stake, this lynching and others reflect an undeniable sense of ritualistic scapegoating of the black victim by the white community in order to rid themselves of some evil. To that effect, Pinn notes that “Blacks, through the forced shedding of blood, were the central element in a perverse form of atonement, a recognition of Reconstruction as evil and sinful and the required offering to restore proper order and relations” (*Terror and Triumph* 72).

Furthermore, as Patterson convincingly explains, the prominence of the KKK’s involvement in lynchings—an organization whose progenitors were the leaders of the Lost Cause—undeniably affirmed the “profound religious significance that these sacrificial murders had for Southerners” (*Rituals of Blood* 202). The sheer amount of southern fundamentalist preachers who joined the Klan (an estimated 40,000) and took part, whether

directly or indirectly, in lynchings and—most explicit of all—the terrifying symbol of the burning cross indisputably reveal the religious mythos constructed by the white perpetrators in their lynchings of black victims. First suggested by Dixon in *The Clansman*, the burning cross—the most recognizable and influential symbol of Christianity—eventually “became identified with the crucifixion of the Negro” (217). In employing the dominant symbol of the Christian religion as a means of terror and control, white supremacists identified their lynchings of blacks as a sacred form of atonement or sacrifice. When considering the racist constructions of blacks as savage animals and denigrations of blackness as signifier of the kingdom of Satan, moreover, it is not difficult to comprehend how many lynchings came to have such religious, sacred significance for the white communities involved. Hence, in some ways, the white supremacist theology of the Lost Cause and, eventually, the KKK can be seen as responses to the Significations upon Christianity by the slaves in the antebellum period. Because the slaves so ingeniously re-appropriated and re-deployed the egalitarian principles of their masters’ religions in their identifications with Jesus, the white supremacist theology formulated following the Civil War sought to reclaim Christ(ianity) through the reifications of antebellum white theology and, most significantly, the reclamation and redeployment of the cross of Christ as a symbol of terror to blacks. The suffering Jesus of the slave songs who was a massa, friend, savior, and king to the slaves was perversely twisted into a burning, deadly reminder to blacks of the oppressive realities of postbellum America.

Nevertheless, in the explicit associations made between the sacred cross and sacrificial lynchings of blacks, white supremacists underestimated the subversive potentiality within the biblical crucifixion of Christ. As Patterson observes, the parallels between the lynched black victim and the death of Christ on the cross “must have been all too obvious” to white



supremacists (*Rituals of Blood* 216). In the epistle to the Galatians, Paul—drawing upon the Old Testament laws found in the book of Deuteronomy—makes explicit the connection between the cross/tree and Christ’s salvific death: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.’” (Gal. 3:13). Therefore, white supremacists clearly understood the seeming Christ-like similarity of the hanged, lynched victim: by making blacks a “curse” upon a tree, they knowingly conflated the sacrificial atonement of blacks with that of Christ’s redeeming death upon the cross. However, what they did not anticipate was the brilliant, artistic move by black artists of the Harlem Renaissance era in employing the subversive power within the projections of black lynched victims as Jesus. By making Jesus a black lynched man, African-American writers and artists not only redeemed the physical blackness of African Americans from the white supremacist theologies of their era—they also fundamentally exposed and subverted the entire scapegoating system of lynching itself. Consequently, in order to understand how the seemingly defeatist image of Jesus as a black lynched victim could be so powerful, unlike the notorious suffering Christ-like figure of Uncle Tom, we must turn lastly to the theory of René Girard. In the collective works of Girard, we find an interpretive, hermeneutic framework by which we—just as the black artists of the Harlem Renaissance—can demythologize the ritualism surrounding systems of scapegoating.

The historical scapegoating of blacks, at its most fundamental level, might be seen as a reflection of the ritualistic means by which white Americans found an outlet for their violence in order to maintain the difference upon which their white identity rested upon, in relation to the dehumanization of blacks. According to Girard, because the mimetic desires of human nature always lead to mimetic rivalries, societies displace their collective violence

upon a victim in order to return to a (temporary) state of peace characterized by perceived difference. Though his theory of mimesis has particularly been a point of critique from scholars for its seemingly totalizing effect on the nature of all human desire and relationships, Girard's ideas on the genesis of violence nevertheless offer profound insight into the psychosocial behaviors of communities and societies that ostracize and victimize certain groups or ethnicities. For the sake of this study, it must suffice to summarize as succinctly as possible the process of mimetic desire to mimetic conflict/violence. Because human desire by nature seeks to imitate the desire of others, consequently leading to the desire to acquire whatever object another desires, the triangular relationship of competing human desires for one object eventually leads to rivalries. And as "rivalry becomes acute, the rivals are more apt to forget about whatever objects are, in principle, the cause of the rivalry and instead to become more fascinated with one another" (*Things Hidden* 26). Robert Hamerton-Kelly explains: "As the plane of the mediator [the person who stands between the mimetic other and the shared, desired object] approaches the plane of the subject, rivalry grows with an intensity inversely proportionate to the diminishing distance. Eventually the mediator becomes an obstacle and the subject shifts attention from the object to the mediator/obstacle" (20). Moreover, because acquisitive mimesis is "contagious," quickly spreading throughout an entire community or society as humans all strive in conflict with each other, the end result is a Hobbesian-like state of (internal) violence that threatens the structure of a society (*Things Hidden* 26).

In order to escape the chaos of their collective, unbridled mimetic rivalries, societies will subconsciously and psychosocially seek resolution by displacing all of their violence upon a victim that is "vulnerable and close at hand" (*Violence and the Sacred* 2). This

“surrogate victim” serves “as a substitute for all the members of the community,” “protect[ing] the entire community from *its own* violence” (8). It is at this point that Girard’s theory of violence provides critical insight into the post-Emancipation lynching of blacks and the racist sentiments and ideologies/theologies that drove it. The marginalized, liminal nature and sacrificial function of the surrogate victim and the state of internal chaos which leads to the selection of the victim in the first place elucidated in Girard’s theory both align with the disenfranchised, marginalized status of African Americans following the abolition of slavery and the socio-cultural function of their lynchings for the re-construction of the Old South. Generally, surrogate victims are those peoples who already reside in a marginal space of society and thus are easiest to blame for its ostensible problems/mimetic violence. Because of their liminal status within society, “belong[ing] both to the inside and the outside of the community,” they almost naturally are chosen as the source of all social ills (*Violence and the Sacred* 272). After the abolition of slavery, freed slaves found themselves occupying such a liminal status within American society. In a tragic irony, the liminality of social death they endured within the master-slave relationship still lived on, though in a different manner, in their supposed freedom. Though ex-slaves strove to create for themselves a place in American society where they “might have an integral function,” the disenfranchisement of Jim Crow laws and the advent of systematic lynching overwhelmingly reinforced in postbellum society the former, antebellum liminal status of blacks (L. Jones 55). As Amiri Baraka avers: “What is so often forgotten in any discussion of the Negro’s ‘place’ in American society is the fact that it was only as a slave that he really had one. The post-slave society had no place for the black American...” (55).

Furthermore, the conditions of internal violence and chaos that predicated Girard's theory of the surrogate victim mechanism encapsulates white American society's state of crisis following the Civil War. Since the height of mimetic violence within a society—what Girard terms the “sacrificial crisis”—leads to a “crisis of distinctions” where the convergence of all mimetic desires and mediators results in the creation of “monstrous doubles,” the selection and othering of the surrogate victim resolves this issue by temporarily re-establishing the fictional differences upon which society is founded (*Violence and the Sacred* 49). Hence, as Girard notes concerning the history of peoples who have been victimized: “No matter what circumstances trigger great collective persecutions, the experience of those who live through them is the same. The strongest impression is without question an extreme loss of social order evidenced by the disappearance of the rules and ‘differences’ that define cultural divisions” (*The Scapegoat* 12). Clearly, then, the collapse of the Old South following the Civil War adheres to the Girardian conditions for the surrogate victim mechanism. As discussed, with the abolition of slavery and, with it, the master-slave dichotomy which formulated white American identity, post-Emancipation America was left in a state of sacrificial crisis.

Key to Girard's theory, furthermore, is the mythologies constructed by persecutors in their selection of the surrogate victim. Foundational to the surrogate victim mechanism is the “degree of misunderstanding” within the persecutors in their displaced outpouring of collective violence upon the victim (*Violence and the Sacred* 5). The “celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the sacrificial act,” for if they do, the psychosocial function of the surrogate victim would not have its intended, subconscious effect (7). In other words, societies must not recognize the true function of the surrogate victim in resolving

their collective mimetic violence; otherwise, the persecution of the surrogate victim would not serve its psychological, socio-cultural purpose in alleviating the violence of society against itself, resulting in the perpetuation of their internal violence. Therefore, “[i]n order to be genuine, in order to exist as a social reality, as a stabilized viewpoint on some act of collective violence,” the surrogate victim mechanism “must remain nonconscious” (*Violent Origins* 78). Only by whole-heartedly unifying against a surrogate victim can a society displace and escape the destructions of their own violence. In order to guarantee the psychosocial function of the victim and hide their real purpose as a substitutionary sacrifice, then, societies create for themselves mythologies that position the victim as the root cause of all societal problems and thereby deserving of their persecution. In that sense, although the selection of surrogate victims is generally a result of their characteristic liminal or marginalized status in society, to the persecutors they are “arbitrary victim[s]” (*Things Hidden* 27).

Thus, mandatory to the surrogate victim mechanism is the mythology constructed around him from the perspective of the persecutor that evinces the belief in the victim’s “responsibility as a trouble maker” (*Violent Origins* 21). Castigating victims as the fundamental cause of all of their problems, societies construct a myth about the victim and its sacrificial purpose, in essence deluding themselves about the realities of their own mimetic violence. The “violence directed at the victim appears to be justified—justified by the responsibility of the scapegoat in bringing about some evil that must be avenged, something bad or harmful that must be resisted and suppressed” (*Violent Origins* 79). This can be seen throughout history during periods of catastrophic, national duress when victims have been mythologically depicted as the sole cause of all problems. The massacring of Jews during the

Black Death or the burning of witches centuries later evince how they “were the indirect victims of internal tensions brought about by epidemics of plague and other societal disasters for which their persecutors held them responsible” (86). Likewise, the blaming of African Americans by white supremacists for the Civil War and the failure of the Reconstruction aligns with the historical victimizing of minorities and other marginalized groups during times of great crisis. Consequently, the racist sentiments about the sexual savagery of black men towards innocent white women used to justify lynching—as just one example—can be seen as mythological narratives from the point of view of the persecutor. In its entirety, then, the mythologies of the Old South engendered by the religion of the Lost Cause ultimately reveal the attempts of many white Americans to avoid confronting the realities of their own internal violence.

Therefore, the surrogate victim mechanism entails a “double transference” in which societies transfer to said victim both their mimetic violence and the mythological, “deflecting mechanisms” of surrogate victimage (Hamerton-Kelly 27). Hamerton-Kelly again explains: “...in theological language, we make the victim bear both our sins and the sin of making the victim bear our sins” (27). Socio-culturally, then, the surrogate victim functions as a mediator between the sacred and profane for society: as initially the *profane* root of all evil, the victim’s sacrificial death brings peace to society, subsequently leading to the victim’s death being viewed as a *sacred* act (*Violence and the Sacred* 258). Thus, as Girard states, the “sacred is violence” (*Things Hidden* 32). It is in the violent shedding of the surrogate victim’s profane blood that he brings sacred peace to the community. To that effect, Girard’s conception of religion is inherently functionalist—the sacred and profane, both tied inextricably to violence, are so named by their psychosocial and cultural function for

societies and not by any inherent, substantive sacredness or profaneness of itself. Victims are “believed to be sacred” by their persecutors because of the “renewed calm in the community” after their deaths (27).

Accordingly, it is fascinating to note the similarities between Girard’s description of the profane-to-sacred function of the surrogate victim and the experiences of crowds during many lynchings. The firsthand experience of the sacred function of the formerly profane, surrogate victim in bringing peace through his death was typically overwhelming and awe-inducing, perhaps comparable to Old Testament accounts of expiring the terror of God’s holiness: “The experience of a supremely evil and then beneficent being, whose appearance and disappearance are punctuated by collective murder, cannot fail to be literally *gripping*. The community that was once so terribly stricken suddenly finds itself free of antagonism, completely delivered” (*Things Hidden* 28). Astonishingly similar to Girard’s description of the surrogate victim’s functional transformation from the profane to sacred are the reactions of mob crowds to lynchings. During a particularly brutal lynching in which a black man accused of murdering the young daughter of a policeman was tortured and burned before ten thousand men, women, and children, a noticeable, religious-like awe came over the crowd right at the point of his death as he was burning. One eyewitness recalled, “for an instant a hush spread over the people” (qtd. in *Rituals of Blood* 194). In that same manner, another account of a lynched victim being burned alive sounds practically identical: “...as the flames leaped up and encircled his neck an unearthly shriek was heard...Nothing could be seen excepting a wriggling motion in the center of the circle of life. A deathly silence followed” (194). As Patterson avers, the transition from the black lynched victim’s “state of life to a state of death” might be seen as reflecting an “essential part of the sacrificial rite” (194).

Using Levi-Strauss's distinctions between raw and cooked food symbolisms, Patterson goes on to argue even more interestingly that the smelling of the "burnt body of the Negro" marked the sacrificial transition from the "live Negro" as "uncooked nature in the raw—a beast, a savage, whose odor is to be avoided at all cost" to the "cooked Negro, properly roasted" who has "been tamed and culturally transformed" and able "to be [symbolically] eaten" (200).

Consequently, if we consider the religious awe overwhelming white mob crowds during moments of death for black lynched victims and the transformative process such victims underwent from life as raw meat to death as cooked meat, we can see indisputably how the lynchings of many black victims align with the function of the Girardian surrogate victim as mediator for the community between the sacred and profane—or, in this sense, from the profane to the sacred. Repeated first-hand accounts of lynchings illustrate this transformative power of the shedding of black blood for the persecutors: initially, the crowd is always filled with murderous rage towards the black victim, cheering and celebrating the sadistic acts of torture done to him; however, at the moment of his death—especially when burned alive—an eerie, overwhelming sense of peace and calm replaces the previous violent anger of the crowd as they stand in awe of the dead lynched victim. Indeed, as noted above by Girard, the experience of the sacred peace the once profane victim brings is "literally gripping" (*Things Hidden* 28).

Furthermore, this connection between the lynched black victim and the Girardian surrogate victim is further solidified by how the social liminality of the surrogate victim as both inside and outside the community translates to his mediating function for the community between the sacred and the profane. It is precisely because of the liminal, societal



status of surrogate victims that they can serve the equally liminal function as mediator between the sacred and profane: “[The surrogate victim] partakes of all possible differences within the community, particularly the difference between within and without; for he passes freely from the interior to the exterior and back again. Thus, the surrogate victim constitutes both a link and a barrier between the community and the sacred” (271).

Post-Emancipation, then, the assimilation of blacks into American society through their marginalization and segregation positioned and conditioned them, so to speak, as prime candidates and victims for the psycho-socio/cultural function of the mediating surrogate victim. And as the lasting of lynchings for decades evince, the power of the surrogate victim lies not only in the sacred violence in the shedding of the victim’s blood but in the self-perpetuating, sacrificial system it engenders. Because of the profound sense of unifying peace the death of the victim proffers, societies ensure through (amongst other rituals) mythological narratives from the perspective of the persecutors the cyclical repetition of the surrogate victim mechanism. The “violence directed against the surrogate victim” is “radically generative in that, by putting an end to the vicious and destructive cycle of violence, it simultaneously initiates another and constructive cycle”—that being the “sacrificial rite...which protects the community from that same violence and allows culture to flourish” (*Violence and the Sacred* 93). Therefore, the ritualization of the surrogate victim leads to the generative system of scapegoating and sacrifice wherein the initial, individual surrogate victim leads to the renewed selection, victimization, and sacrifice of more victims or scapegoats. Though somewhat semantic in terminology, the surrogate victim engenders future scapegoats or sacrificial victims that serve “a vital social function by renewing the energies of the founding mechanism” of that first surrogate victim (Hamerton-Kelly 35).

Hence, the myriad of racist sentiments and stereotypes that all worked together to dehumanize African Americans post-Emancipation and drive the systematic lynching of thousands of black men and women can also be viewed as mythologies constructed from the vantage point of white society to maintain the scapegoating and sacrificing of blacks. In some regard, those mythologies are quite straightforward and evident, such as the religion of the Lost Cause which constructed a sacred, revisionist history that blamed African Americans for the internal conflicts of the Civil War, the subsequent fall of the Old South, and the failure of Reconstruction. As Girard writes concerning the scapegoating of victims, African Americans were accused of “crimes” which “attack[ed] the very foundation of cultural order, the family and the hierarchal differences without which there would be no social order” (*The Scapegoat* 15). In that regard, all of the racist ideology towards blacks discussed so far—white male fear of licentious black men and innocent white women, the satanic evil of black skin, the sub-human animality of blacks—speak to the socio-cultural foundations upon which white society depended upon.

Therefore, through the lens of Girardian theory, we can understand how the aims of white supremacists to rid the country of the evil of their lynch victim’s blackness and licentious savagery ultimately revealed the mythologies constructed by a persecuting society to forestall the confrontation with their own internal violence and crisis. At first glance, then, the decisions of black artists during the Harlem Renaissance to portray themselves as lynched victims may seem as self-defeating and submissive to the sacrificial system of scapegoating. Orlando Patterson, for example, implicitly critiques the response of blacks in adhering to the same (burning) cross used to terrorize them: “There we find the seemingly frightful paradox that the more Afro-Americans were tortured and crucified by Christians in the name of their

God and under the banner of the cross, the more Afro-Americans renewed their faith in this very same religion, seeking solace from this very same cross” (*Rituals of Blood* xv).

However, what Patterson fails to realize is the subversive potentiality within the same cross of Christ used to instill fear within millions of blacks post-Emancipation. Black artists did not portray themselves simply as lynched victims—they made Christ himself into a black lynched victim. In doing so, black artists of the era not only re-signified and re-contextualized the religion of the slaves and their identification *with* Jesus, they also ingeniously subverted both white Christianity and the entire scapegoating system of lynching. To understand how, we must once again turn to Girardian theory in order to understand the narrative power of Christ’s death in de-mythologizing the sacrificial system of scapegoating. As Girard surprisingly reveals in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1978), it is only through the narratives of the Bible that we are able to perceive and deconstruct the mythologies that hide the sacrificial violence of scapegoating. By presenting the ritualistic violence of society from the standpoint of the victim instead of the persecutor, Girard argues that the narratives of the Old and New Testament expose the mechanisms of the surrogate victim and scapegoating at the foundation of all societies. In the Old Testament stories of characters like Abel, Job, and Joseph, Girard demonstrates how each narrative works to champion the cause of the victim and thereby subvert the ritualistic process of scapegoating, as opposed to the mythologies of societies presented from the viewpoint of the persecutor (Girard notably uses *Oedipus the King* as a primary example) which conversely serve to perpetuate that system by castigating the victims as deserving the blame projected upon them. In the founding murder of civilization in the Bible, consequently, Cain is “presented as a vulgar murderer” of his innocent brother and victim Abel, whereas the

tragedy of Oedipus portrays him as deserving of the scapegoating and victimizing that occurs to him (*Things Hidden* 147).

Moreover, of all the narratives in the Bible from the perspective of the victim, it is the story of Jesus in the gospels that ultimately subverts in totality the history of the sacrificial system of scapegoating. In the death of Jesus, Girard posits that the history of sacrificial ritualism finally ended through his alternative message of love as a solution for the violence of mimetic rivalry. In “submitting to violence, Christ reveals and uproots the structural matrix of all religion” and its basis upon sacrificial systems (*Things Hidden* 178). Jean-Michel Oughourlian summarizes:

Jesus, of all the victims who have ever been, is the only one capable of revealing the true nature of violence to its utmost...his death is exemplary; in it the meaning of all the persecutions and expulsions in which mankind has ever engaged, as well as all the misconceptions that have sprung from them, stand revealed and represented for all time...Jesus, in other words, provides the scapegoat *par excellence*...(209).

Hence, though Girard perhaps unnecessarily delineates Christ’s death as a “non-sacrifice” (in that his death subverts the entire scapegoating system by being a non-sacrificial death instead of another sacrificial death that would ultimately only perpetuate the system) his fascinating reading of the narrative of Jesus paved the way for a new hermeneutic to uncover the displacement of societal violence upon victims. As a viewpoint from the *ultimate* victim—the divine Son of God—the death of Jesus proffers a de-mythologizing, interpretative framework in which the mechanisms of sacrificial scapegoating underlying society can be exposed, deconstructed, and subverted.

In identifying black lynched victims *as* Jesus, consequently, African-American artists of the Harlem Renaissance not only exposed the hypocrisy of white Christianity—they also exposed the mythology of the lynching/scapegoating of blacks from their viewpoints as the victim/black Son of God. More than a delusional submission to the sacrificial system of scapegoating, the representations of Jesus as a black lynched victim de-mythologized the very mechanisms of lynching itself. Hamerton-Kelly writes: “...demythification consists in retelling the story from the point of view of the victim, exposing the lie, and revealing the founding mechanism” (38). Thus, in identifying themselves as the “*par excellence*” of all scapegoat victims—the crucified Son of God—black artists of the Harlem Renaissance employed, much like the slaves in their Signification upon the religion of their masters, the subversive potentiality within Christianity. The presentations of a black lynched Christ in the stories, poems, and paintings of artists like Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Aaron Douglas evince the recognition that, despite the designs of white supremacists, the “Cross is not a sacrificial mechanism but the deconstruction of sacrifice” (60). The dimensions of subversion in their depictions, therefore, are astounding. One on level, the physical blackening of Christ challenged the figurehead of the whitewashed Christ and the history of racist sentiments attached to physical and metaphysical constructions of whiteness and blackness. On another level, the additional portrayal of Christ as both black *and* lynched de-mythologized the foundational, ritualistic mechanisms of the entire system of lynching and its white supremacist ideologies.

Fundamental to these subversive dimensions of the art of African Americans during the Harlem Renaissance is the inherent subversiveness of biblical Christianity itself. As discussed in chapter two concerning the slaves’ Signification upon the egalitarian principles

of Christianity, the very figure of Jesus—and all of his metaphorical roles/offices and theological functions—resists hegemonic homogenization by any one oppressive group. In that regard, the levels of subversion in the figure of Christ as both black and a lynched victim are predicated upon the theological representation of Christ in orthodox Christianity as the divine Son of God—paradoxically fully man and fully God. According to Girardian theory, it is only because of Christ’s divinity that he is “the only one who can fully reveal the way in which the founding murder [of Cain and Abel] has broadened its hold upon mankind” (*Things Hidden* 216). It is Christ’s position as the “only Mediator, the one bridge between the Kingdom of violence and the Kingdom of God” that allowed him to end the self-perpetuating, mediating function of the human scapegoat (216). Girard asserts: “To recognize Christ as God is to recognize him as the only being capable of rising above the violence that had, up to that point, absolutely transcended mankind. Violence is the controlling agent in every form of mythic or cultural structure, and Christ is the only agent who is capable of escaping from these structures and freeing us from their dominance” (219). In the divinity of Christ, then, African Americans of the Harlem Renaissance found a theological and artistic means by which to confront and resist the oppression and racism of white supremacy. In Jesus’s divine nature, both the physical blackness of African Americans could be redeemed and the sacred violence of the mediating lynched victim demythologized.

When depicting Jesus as a black lynched victim, black artists of the Harlem Renaissance were aware of the hegemonic implications of the whitewashed Christ and his position as the figurehead of the sacrificial system of scapegoating and lynching. Du Bois’s writings in particular are inundated with religious imagery and symbolism that confronted the white theology of the era. Though his privileged, talented-tenth model may have been

antithetical to the more universal embracement of black high, middle, and low class/culture of artists like Hughes and Locke—and thus perhaps places him outside of the general artistic and socio-cultural aims of the Harlem Renaissance—Du Bois was nonetheless a major figure and influential voice for many of the era’s prominent leaders. Hughes, for example, recalled: “My earliest memories of written words are those of Du Bois and the Bible. My maternal grandmother in Kansas, the last surviving widow of John Brown’s Raid, read to me as a child from both the Bible and *The Crisis*. And one of the first books I read on my own was *The Souls of Black Folk*” (qtd. in Blum 6). Du Bois’s early stories depicting Jesus as a lynched black victim influenced the younger generation of black artists in the Harlem Renaissance, who would later incorporate into their own poems, plays, and paintings similar subversive representations of Christ.

Accordingly, as Blum convincingly demonstrates in his study *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (2007), Du Bois consciously attacked throughout his writings the “various connections between whiteness and goodness on the one hand and blackness and badness on the other” in the religious ideology of American society (108). Poems like “The Song of Smoke” clearly illustrate his awareness and challenging of the religious symbolisms attached to physical and metaphysical blackness and whiteness:

I will be black as blackness can—  
 The blacker the mantle, the mightier the man!  
 For blackness was ancient ere whiteness began.  
 I am daubing God in night,  
 I am swabbing Hell in white:

I am the Smoke King

I am black. (qtd. in “W.E.B. Du Bois on God and Jesus” 23-24)

Whereas Du Bois conflates the traditional whiteness of God’s holiness and light in this poem with the blackness of African Americans, he most prominently challenged and exposed in other stories and poems the hypocrisy of the white American Jesus. Du Bois’s prayer “A Litany of Atlanta” expresses quite succinctly the battle over the body and symbolisms of Christ throughout his writings: “Sit no longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and dumb suffering. Surely Thou too are not white, O Lord, a pale, bloodless, heartless thing? *Ah! Christ of all the Pities!*” (“A Litany” 217). Accordingly, Du Bois sets out to answer for himself the question he posed in his litany by inserting within his other stories Jesus himself as a black man. Indeed, it is because he recognized the “potential social and psychological value” the “doctrines of Christianity” had for black people—the subversive and resistive potentiality within them—that one of the most “pervasive metaphors throughout [his] writings is that of the black man as suffering Jesus Christ” (Zuckerman, “Introduction” 10). In stories like “Jesus Christ in Georgia” (1911), “The Gospel According to Mary Brown” (1919), “The Second Coming” (1920), “Pontius Pilate” (1920), and “The Son of God” (1933), Du Bois engages in a clear, artistic Signification upon the religion of the slaves by drawing direct connection between the suffering of African Americans and the sufferings of Jesus—yet with a difference. As noted earlier, while the slaves identified *with* the person of Jesus as a savior who shared their suffering, Du Bois further re-signified and re-contextualized that relationship by identifying blacks *as* Jesus, expressing like the music of the blues a postbellum evolution of the divided African-American religious identity.



Throughout these stories, Du Bois re-contextualizes various aspects of the biblical narrative of Christ's life to expose the hypocrisy of white Christianity. In "Jesus Christ in Georgia," Jesus is portrayed as a mysterious, unnamed, mulatto stranger who forces a Colonel and his wife to realize the inherent racism of their supposed religious faith. Towards the climax of the story, the stranger converses with the Colonel's wife about a black convict soon to be hanged for murdering a white man who attacked his wife, forcing her to come to terms with the hypocrisy of her religion:

"And do you like them all?" asked the stranger.

She hesitated.

"Most of them," she said; and then, looking up into his face and putting her hand in his as though he were her father, she said:

"There are none I hate; no, none at all."

"You love your neighbor as yourself?" She hesitated—

"I try—" she began, and then looked the way he was looking; down under the hill, where lay a little, half-ruined cabin.

"They are niggers," she said briefly.

He looked at her. Suddenly a confusion came over her, and she insisted, she knew not why—

"But they are niggers." ("Jesus Christ in Georgia" 97)

After realizing that she does not follow Christ's message of loving her neighbor as herself, she looks out the window and witnesses the lynching of the black convict. To her shock, the black convict hanging from the limb of the tree suddenly takes on the appearance of the crucified Christ: "She shuddered as she heard the creaking of the limb where the body hung.

But resolutely she crawled to the window and peered out in the moon-light; she saw the dead man writhe. He stretched his arms out like a cross, looking upward. She gasped and clung to the window sill” (98). Looking up into the sky from the lynched black convict suddenly transformed into a Christ-like figure, she sees the stranger and comes to grips with the “horror” of her empty religion: “There, heaven-tall, earth-wide, hung the stranger on the crimson cross, riven and bloodstained with thorn-crowned head and pierced hands” (98).

Similarly, in his other passion stories, Du Bois consistently portrays black lynched victims as Christ himself. In “The Gospel According to Mary Brown,” the biblical scene of Christ before Pontius Pilate and the blood-thirsty Jewish mob is re-contextualized as a scene involving a black man—named Joshua, an Old Testament name alluding to Jesus—before a white northern judge and a similarly blood-thirsty white mob. Preaching a message of racial equality before God, Joshua comes under attack from a white mob who cannot fathom blacks as children of God as well. In quite an overt, artistic move, Du Bois puts the very words of Christ in Joshua’s mouth:

“What do you mean by saying God is you-all’s father—is God a nigger?”

And Joshua flamed in mighty anger and answered and said: “Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! Fill ye up then the measure of your fathers, Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell!”

In wild fury the mob seized him and haled him before a judge. (“The Gospel According to Mary Brown” 145)

Rushed before a northern Judge who—like the biblical Pontius Pilate—cannot understand the murderous lust of the mob, the black Joshua, like Jesus, is sent to be lynched/crucified:

In wild fury the mob seized him and haled him before a judge.

The Judge—he was from the North—was sorely puzzled. “What shall I do with him? he asked helplessly.

“Kill the nigger,” yelled the mob.

“Why, what evil hath he done?”

But they cried out the more, saying: “Let him be crucified.”

Thereupon the Judge washed his hands of the whole matter, saying: “I am innocent of his blood.” (145)

As Joshua is lynched, he mirrors Jesus’s famous words of forgiveness on the cross: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (146). The message of non-violence expressed by Du Bois’s lynched black Christ, as explored in Girard’s non-sacrificial reading of Jesus’s death in the Bible, is central to the story’s subversion of white Christianity and the sacrificial system of scapegoating. By portraying Joshua as a black Jesus who overcomes the sacred violence of racism and lynching, Du Bois does not express a self-defeating admittance of the futility of the cross for African Americans; rather, he ingeniously redeploys the cross as a demythologizing hermeneutic that subverts the designs of white supremacists in using it as a religious symbol of terror.

The ending of the story reinforces Du Bois’s subversive re-appropriation of the cross in his resurrection of the black lynched Jesus protagonist. In her deep sorrow over the death of her innocent black son, Mary—another obvious allusion to the mother of Jesus—at first succumbs to the notion that the lynching of her son and the white supremacist perversion of the cross it represents negates the power of the cross for African Americans. She angrily accuses God of injustice and, implicitly, being a God of whites only: “God, you ain’t fair—

You ain't fair, God! You didn't ought to do it—if you didn't want him black, you didn't have to make him black; if you didn't want him unhappy, why did you let him think? And then you let them mock him, and hurt him, and lynch him! Why, why did you do it God?" (146). However, at the nadir of her religious faith, Mary sees her crucified son—whose “hair shone,” clothes “were white and whole and clean,” and voice “was the voice of God”—resurrected from the grave (146). Upon seeing her son as the resurrected black Son of God, Mary's heart “leap[s] within her,” understanding that her crucified son has transcended the sacred violence of sacrificial lynching and scapegoating (146). It is in the divinity of Joshua as (black) Jesus—his status as the “only Mediator, the one bridge between the Kingdom of violence and the Kingdom of God”—that the story ultimately subverts the sacrificial system of lynching and its mythologies of white supremacy in the story.

Consequently, if we were to spend time closely analyzing Du Bois's other passion stories, the same subversive re-deployment of the cross would quickly become clear. “Pontius Pilate” reads almost exactly like the interrogation scene of “The Gospel According to Mary Brown,” being perhaps an even more overt re-application of Christ's examination by Pilate before an angry mob to the life of a black man soon to be lynched. As one influential religious leader of that story asserts concerning the black Jesus protagonist: “He blasphemed against the White Race” (“Pontius Pilate” 158). Likewise, in “The Son of God,” another character named Mary has a divine Son who is lynched by an angry white mob. What is fascinating about this particular story, however, is the addition of a father figure who cannot see the power in his son's death. The ending conversation between Mary and Joe (an allusion to Joseph, Jesus's earthly father figure) powerfully positions the conflicting views of African Americans during the era towards the Cross:

“Trying to get out of his place; that’s it,” he yelled. Criticizing white folk—  
I told him—I warned him—”

...And Mary said;

“His name shall be called Wonderful, Councillor, the Mighty God, the  
Ever-Lasting Father and the Prince of Peace.”

“You crazy fool,” shrieked Joe. “You always was dippy about that idiot.”

But Mary talked on.

“Behold the Sign of Salvation—a noosed rope.”

Joe flung out of the room and fell down the steps and crawled out to the  
barn and leaned against it; gripping its planks with bleeding hands.

He saw the shadow of the Noose across the world and heard Mary’s voice  
looming in the night:

“He is the Son of God!”

And Joe buried his head in the dirt and sobbed. (“The Son of God” 185)

Whereas Joe cannot see beyond the brutality and sacred violence of the lynch rope, Mary understands the de-mythologizing power within the “noosed rope,” deeming it the “Sign of Salvation.” As Du Bois intimates in Joe’s vision of “the shadow of the Noose across the world,” the death of their son as the divine “Son of God” subverts the sacrificial system of lynching in its entirety. Nevertheless, unlike the earlier passion stories of Du Bois, the ending of this story ends on an undeniably ambiguous note, perhaps indicative of Du Bois’s own personal, troubled relationship with Christianity later in life.

Furthermore, the works of other prominent African-American poets such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes recast the white American Jesus into a literal black Christ who

identified with the black skin of the lynched African American. In Cullen's poem "The Black Christ" (1929), dedicated to "White America," a black father openly questions the righteousness of the white Jesus after the lynching of his black son: "Or is the white Christ, too, distraught/ By these dark skins His Father wrought?" (qtd. in *The Color of Christ* 197). By the end of the poem, however, the lynched black son returns as the resurrected Christ, resulting in his father's renewed faith in God: "That love which has no boundary;/ Our eyes have looked on Calvary" (197). Like Du Bois's passion stories, it is in the divinity of the black lynched Christ figure—evidenced in his resurrection from the grave—that ultimately subverts the hypocrisy of white Christianity and the sacrificial system of lynching.

A few years later in Hughes's "Christ in Alabama" (1931), the portrayal of Christ as a black lynched man is even more direct and powerful:

Christ is a nigger,

Beaten and black:

Oh, bare your back!

Mary is His mother:

Mammy of the South,

Silence your mouth.

God is His father:

White Master above

Grant Him your love.

Most holy bastard  
 Of the bleeding mouth,  
     Nigger Christ  
     On the Cross  
     Of the South. (*The Panther and the Lash* 37)

In his association of Jesus and Mary to the ubiquitous, racist stereotypes of blacks during ante/post-bellum American society—the derogatory “nigger” and the “Mammy of the South”—Hughes shockingly and forcefully racializes the person of Jesus. Though God may be the “White Master above,” on earth Jesus is the “Most holy bastard”—the “Nigger Christ” of “the South.” In the very pairing of the profane “nigger” with the sacred “Christ,” Hughes re-signifies the sacred/profane structure of Christianity by conflating the profane blackness (as deemed by white society) of African Americans with the sacred whitewashed Jesus of mainstream American culture. By doing so, Hughes and other writers “reversed the cosmic order asserted and upheld by the lynch mob, one that linked whiteness with godliness and blackness with sinfulness” (Blum 138).

However, like the ending of Du Bois’s “The Son of God,” Hughes’s eventual response to the perversion of the Cross by white supremacists was a stark rejection of Christianity. As he acerbically and controversially penned just a year later in “Goodbye, Christ” (1932):

Listen, Christ,  
 You did alright in your day, I reckon—  
 But that day’s gone now.  
 They ghosted you up a swell story,

too,  
Called it Bible—  
But it's dead now,  
The popes and the preachers've  
Made too much money from it.  
They've sold you to too many....

Goodbye,  
Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,  
Beat it on away from here now.  
Make way for a new guy with no  
religion at all—  
A real guy named  
Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin  
Worker ME—  
I said, ME!...

Don't be so slow about movin'!  
The World is mine from now on—  
And nobody's gonna sell ME  
To a king, or a general,  
Or a millionaire. (qtd. in Callahan 214).



In addition to being a scathing critique of the commodification and hypocrisy of Christianity, Hughes's poem illustrates the postbellum evolution of the divided religious identity of the slaves. In his rejection of Christ(ianity) and subsequent emergence as "a new guy with no/ religion at all," he evinces a more radical instance of postbellum blacks' relationship to their religious heritage. While many other African Americans re-signified and re-contextualized the religion of their past in the face of the contextual realities of post-Emancipation America, others rejected the religion of the slaves completely. Nevertheless, even in their claims of complete atheism, their religious heritage inevitably influenced their thinking and writings. In that regard, just as Du Bois's eventual allegiance to the atheistic claims of Marxism does not negate the heavy influence and presence of religion within his writings and thinking, Hughes's irreverent identification with the atheism of "Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin" only serves to emphasize the role of religion in the construction of his identity.

In addition to these black writers and poets who subversively employed the Cross, many other artists of the era and onward contributed as well to the emerging images of the black (lynched) Christ figure. Aaron Douglas's *The Crucifixion* (1927), for example, emphasized the darkness of Christ's complexion. Several years later, Julius Bloch's unforgettable painting *The Lynching* (1932) and William Johnson's *Jesus and the Three Marys* (1939) both depicted Jesus as a black (lynched) victim, the former illustrating a naked black man tied to a tree with his eyes cast upward to God and arms spread open as a white mob stands below and the latter showing a black crucified Jesus hanging from the cross as the blackened versions of his mother and the two other Marys mourn at his feet. These paintings influenced folk artist Clementine Hunter, who would later create more than a hundred paintings of Jesus as a black lynched victim in her exhibition *Cotton Crucifixion*

(1970). Therefore, whether done consciously or not, the dimensions of deconstructive subversion within the portrayal of Jesus as a black lynched victim are astounding: theologically, black artists collapsed the sacred and profane structure of white Christianity in the physical blackening (the profane) of the whitewashed (sacred) Jesus; socio-culturally, the sacred and profane mediation of the scapegoat is de-mythologized in the portrayal of the lynched black man both from the perspective of the victim and as the divine Son of God himself. As Blum summarizes:

While some African Americans responded by denouncing Christianity and establishing new religious traditions, Du Bois and a host of African American authors and artists chose instead to associate the black victim with the biblical Christ. With this link, they tried to divest white violence of its sacred status by destabilizing the myth of white civility and black brutality (146).

In a manner not dissimilar from the slaves, then, black artists from the Harlem Renaissance signified upon the subversive potentiality within the figure of Jesus in order to combat the socio-cultural, political, and religious systems of oppression of their era.

Decades later during the height of social and racial unrest in the 1950s and 60s, the historical lineage of African-American religion and its (re)appropriations and representations of Jesus again came to a forefront in the diametrical leaders of the Civil Rights Movement: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. Following the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama on 1963 where four black girls were murdered and the face of the white Jesus in the stained-glass window of the church was symbolically shattered, African Americans once again became torn over the person of Jesus. This battle over the symbol and color of Christ was represented between the movement's two most

iconic leaders. While King's message of non-violent resistance heralded a universal Savior whose skin color did not matter, Malcolm X's campaign of black nationalism vehemently rejected the historical representations of Christ as white. At the risk of being reductive, each leader's political position on the person of Jesus can be seen as having clear roots within the history of African-American religious thought explored thus far in this study: King's call for peaceful unity amongst all ethnicities and emphasis upon the metaphysical, egalitarian nature of Jesus's life and ministry—and his emphasis on the fact that “The color of Jesus' skin is of little or no consequence”—can be traced to the religion of the slaves, whereas Malcolm X's more radical attack against the white color of Jesus's skin places him amongst the artists of the Harlem Renaissance era who sought to racialize the person of Jesus (qtd in Blum and Harvey 416).

Though King certainly advocated forms of protest such as boycotting and marching, stating himself that “Christianity is itself a protest,” his portrayal of the person of Jesus, like the religion of the slaves, “did not make the color of Christ an issue” (Douglas and Burkett 416). Vehemently castigating the white Jesus as detrimental to the cause of black nationalists and people, Malcolm X viewed King's movement, “with its nonviolent strategy and emphasis on love for the enemy, [as] merely an example of the ‘slave-holder's religion’ in practice” (416). As Malcolm X stated in a straightforward, simple manner during a 1963 interview: “Christ wasn't white. Christ was a black man” (410). Amiri Baraka's poem “When We'll Worship Jesus” perfectly captures the views of black nationalists toward the relevancy of the white Jesus in the Civil Rights Movement:

we'll worship jesus when  
he get bad enough to at least scare

somebody—cops not afraid  
 of jesus  
 pushers not afraid  
 of jesus, capitalists racists  
 imperialists not afraid  
 of jesus shit they makin money  
 off jesus  
 we'll worship jesus when mao  
 do, when toure does  
 when the cross replaces Nkrumah's  
 star  
 Jesus need to hurt some a our  
 enemies, then we'll check him  
 out (qtd. in Callahan 215)

Broadly speaking, then, the positions of King and Malcolm X over the body of Jesus can also be seen as reflecting the internal conflict African Americans faced during the Harlem Renaissance over the lynched black Christ figure. Indeed, their lasting impacts upon American society emphasize the inescapable legacy of the African-American relationship to Jesus from its inception in slavery.

Later, in the 1970s, the emergence of the black theological movement within the academy—building upon the activism of King, Malcolm X, and black nationalism—led to a systematic, religious representation of Jesus as a symbolically (and, for some theologians, physically) black figure who identified with oppressed African Americans. Through the

works of theologians like James Cone and Albert Cleage, the role of Jesus in African-American Christianity was systematically organized and constructed into a liberation theology. In both Cone's and Cleage's systematic theologies, the metaphysical and physical blackness of Jesus are defined in their relation to the historical and on-going struggles of African Americans. Again, like King and Malcolm X, the contrasting liberation theologies of Cone and Cleage reveal the influence of the historical battles over the physical and metaphysical significations of Christ's color.

Cone, probably the most prominent figure of modern black liberation theology, determines the blackness of Christ through his shared suffering with the lives—past and present—of African Americans. He writes: “The black community is an oppressed community primarily because of its blackness; hence the christological importance of Jesus must be found in his blackness. If he is not black as we are, then the resurrection has little significance for our times” (*A Black Theology* 120). Conversely, Cleage identifies Christ as ethnically black by engaging in a questionable, revisionist history of the genealogy of Jesus. Regardless, his adamant position on the importance of Christ being of African origins reiterates the historical battles over Christ's color: “Black people cannot build dignity on their knees worshipping a white Christ. We must put down this white Jesus which the white man gave us in slavery and which has been tearing us to pieces” (3). Therefore, while Cone and Cleage may have been among the first to introduce and validate the theology of black Christianity within the academy, their conceptions of Jesus originate within progressions from the religion of the slaves to the proto-liberation theology of the Harlem Renaissance. As Hopkins duly notes, for example: “By theologically naming Christ black, then, Du Bois

stands as a major predecessor of the 1960s black Christological movement” (“W. E. B. Du Bois on God and Jesus” 34).

In totality, then, the deconstructions and racializations of African-American Christianity and the person of Jesus, from the music of the blues post-Emancipation to the liberation theology post-Civil Rights, illustrate the acts of Signification throughout the progressive, historical contexts of black history and the continued relevancy of the Du Boisian double consciousness of the African-American religious identity. Whether portrayed as the lynched black man in Hughes’s poetry, the figure of peace in King’s sermons, or the symbolically black Savior of the oppressed in Cone’s liberation theology, the various subversive representations of Jesus speak to the (spiritual) strivings of African Americans amidst the hegemony and subjugation of American society.

## Chapter 6: Tupac Shakur and Kanye West: From Black Jesuz to Yeezus

### I

Perhaps no form of music has been more controversial, influential, and representative of an entire culture than rap music. From its troubling themes of misogyny, homophobia, violence, and materialistic excess to its liberating messages of survival and self-worth amidst the oppressive realities of the ghettos, the birth and evolution of rap music both empowered the voices of the troubled youth, “gangstas,” and hustlers and also problematically glorified some of the ugly realities of that same life. These contradictions that have characterized rap music since its beginnings, however, do not negate its power or meaning; rather, they reveal that beneath rap music’s surface level of drug trafficking, gang warfare, and sexual explicitness lies the age-old attempt to resolve the double consciousness of the African-American religious identity. The “demonization of gangsta rappers” by American society, then, is often nothing more than “a convenient excuse for cultural and political elites to pounce on a group of artists who are easy prey” (*Between God and Gangsta Rap* xiii). As Michael Eric Dyson writes in *Between God and Gangsta Rap* (1996), a seminal work that greatly contributed to the legitimization of the study of rap music in the academy, “The much more difficult task is to find out what conditions cause [the] anger and hostility” present in the rap music and hip-hop culture (xiii).

To that point, rap music—like the slave songs and blues before it—encapsulates the contextual struggles and realities of blacks during a certain era of African-American history.

Evolving among the inner city black youth of New York City during the 1970s, rap music first began as a “quasi-song with rhyme and rhythmic speech” that drew upon “black street language” and was “recited over a musical soundtrack” (Keyes 153). By end of the 1970s, it had begun attracting the attention of the music entrepreneurs who saw opportunities to capitalize on its growing popularity. Among the earliest to do so successfully were Sylvia and Joe Robinson, whose hip-hop group Sugarhill Gang released the first rap record—“Rapper’s Delight” in 1979—to become a major hit on the Billboard charts. By 1986, rap had become a popular mainstream music from the emergence of other hip-hop acts, the most notable being Run DMC and their musical fusion of rap music with the rock-n-roll of artists like Aerosmith (153). However, towards the end of the 1980s, the sudden explosion of crack cocaine into the inner-city ghettos and its disastrous impact upon millions of mostly poor blacks led to changes in the ways young black men constructed their masculinities and related to one another. Consequently, the boom of drug trafficking and gang-affiliated violence brought on by the introduction of crack to the inner-city naturally resulted in the transition of hip-hop from a “benign, part-orientated music and culture” to one that became regarded by conservative, mainstream America as “largely malevolent” (White 76).

Of the new hip-hop artists and groups whose music began reflecting the violent realities of the ghettos, none was more profoundly influential during this period and upon future generations than the hip-hop act N.W.A. From the release of their debut album *Straight Outta Compton* in August of 1988, N.W.A. altered the music industry and American society at large—for better or for worse. Miles White writes:

N.W.A. began the mainstreaming of hardcore styles of gangsta rap that would reintroduce into popular culture historical representations of black males as



the hypermasculine brutes and hypersexual bucks turned street-hardened gangbangers and drug dealers, told in graphic ghetto narratives involving casual black-on-black violence, drug trafficking, misogyny, and gunplay. (64)

In that regard, the themes of masculine authenticity in hardcore, gangsta rap—with all of its violence and sexual crassness—evinced a historical lineage to the antebellum stereotypes of black men as licentious brutes and, more importantly, a subversive attempt to re-appropriate those stereotypes amidst the degradations of the hood life. The repeated use and re-deployment of the word “nigga”—a re-interpretation of the racist epithet “nigger”—as a term for self-identification and proud validation speaks to one aspect of the subversive nature of gangsta rap music. Nevertheless, as a “new kind of figure in American popular culture,” the gangsta figure popularized in this music was characterized by an unavoidable paradox: in one aspect, the packaging and selling of N.W.A.’s music by the corporate music industry to millions of white and black youth “(re)centered the black male body into an affective economy of racial desire that, like African American blackface minstrel performers in the nineteenth century, commodified pejorative representations of themselves because satisfying demand for such images proved to be a lucrative trade”; on the other hand, the expressions of resistance and rage against police brutality and governmental oppression in that same commodified gangsta figure inarguably provided the ethnic youth of the inner-cities with a cathartic source of solidarity and self-worth (69).

As a “coping strategy to deal with the depression and socio-economic downturn of the day,” then, rap music as an art form—and its evolution into the gangsta rap of the late 1980s—continues the legacy of artistic resistance of the slave songs and blues before it (V. Ford 85). Indeed, like its musical predecessors, the cultural roots of rap music can be traced

back to West African origins, particularly the bardic traditions of the toast, sermons, signifying, and the dozens (156). Moreover, just as the blues evinced a postbellum evolution of the African-American divided religious identity as represented in the songs of the slaves, the (gangsta) rap music of the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s entailed the modern evolution of the divided black religious identity. As highlighted above, rap music is characterized by inherent contradictions, what Cornel West deems the “paradoxical cry of desperation and celebration of the black underclass and poor working class” (*The Cornel West Reader* 482). And while critics have castigated rap for those contradictions—its simultaneous messages of hope and violence, resistance and law-breaking, brotherhood and misogyny—what they ultimately reveal is the modern manifestation of the double consciousness of the African-American religious identity that began during the era of slavery. As Tricia Rose astutely notes, such criticisms of rap music overlook the “contradictory stance toward capitalism, raging sexism, and other ‘non progressive’ elements that have *always* been part and parcel of jazz, the blues, and R&B, as well as any number of other nonblack cultural forms” (24). The fact that “blues lyrics are as sexist as any contemporary rap lyrics” does not justify the misogyny and mis-treatment/representation of women present in rap music; rather, it serves to emphasize and confirm how rap music represents the modern evolution of the double consciousness of African-American identity (24).

Accordingly, as a part of the black artistic tradition, rap music artists expressed their modern evolution of the historical divided black religious identity in their Signification upon their Christian heritage—specifically, in the figure of Jesus. Through the iconic person of Jesus, rap artists found an outlet for the contextual realities of their era, just as their artistic

forefathers before them. Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the life and music of Tupac Shakur. As by far the most influential artist of the gangsta rap era—the “zeitgeist in sagging jeans”—Tupac embodied in his music all of the contradictions inherent within the genre (*Holler if You Hear Me* 106). One of his earliest songs, “Young Black Male,” captures the anger, resistance, and troublesome misogyny of the gangsta rap generation:

Young black male  
 I try to effect by kicking the facts  
 And stacking much mail  
 I’m packing a gat cause guys wanna jack  
 And fuck going to jail  
 Cause I ain’t a crook, despite how I look  
 I don’t see yayo  
 They judging a brother like covers on books  
 Follow me into a flow  
 I’m sure you know, which way to go  
 I’m getting ‘em out of the doors  
 So slip on the slope, let’s skip on the flow  
 I’m fucking the sluts and hoes  
 The bigger the butts the tighter the clothes.  
 The gimminy jimminy grows  
 Then whaddaya know, it’s off with some clothes.

Conscious of racial profiling and the almost impossible odds of young black males of this era to overcome the bleak realities of the hood, Tupac expresses in this early song much of the

paradoxical issues of gangsta rap present in his later music (though he only lived to the extremely young age of twenty-five, Tupac was relatively prolific in recording music). The topics of gang warfare (“I’m packing a gat”), oppressive institutions (“They judging a brother like covers on a book”), and sexual deviancy coupled with female denigration (“I’m fucking the sluts and hoes/ The bigger the butts the tighter the clothes”) in this song would only become more emphasized in his later music as Tupac authenticated and glorified the self-proclaimed “thug life.” As Dyson notes, Tupac’s “preoccupation with being a ‘real nigga’ looms over nearly everything he did,” a need for black authenticity that would influence the entire hip-hop culture (*Holler if You Hear Me* 15). Indeed, Tupac’s mantra to “Live my life as a thug nigga until the day I die” underlies much of what he wrote (“All Eyez On Me”).

However, to isolate one aspect of Tupac’s music—like the genre of gangsta rap as a whole—elides the paradoxical complexity of his life and words. Despite the materialistic excess and masculine bravado within much of his music, an equally constant theme throughout his catalogue of songs is the exposing of the oppressive systems and institutions stacked against young black men and women of his time. In “Changes,” Tupac provides one of the most moving and powerful descriptions of the existential crisis blacks faced in the late 1990s (and perhaps, to this day):

I see no changes, wake up in the morning and I ask myself:

“Is life worth living? Should I blast myself?”

I’m tired of being poor and, even worse, I’m black

My stomach hurts so I’m looking for a purse to snatch

Cops give a damn about a negro

Pull the trigger, kill a nigga, he’s a hero

“Give the crack to the kids: who the hell cares?  
 One less hungry mouth on the welfare!”  
 First ship ‘em dope and let ‘em deal to brothers  
 Give ‘em guns, step back, watch ‘em kill each other  
 “It’s time to fight back,” that’s what Huey said  
 Two shots in the dark, now Huey’s dead.

In his cry against the disastrous impact of crack cocaine upon the inner-city black youth, Tupac goes on to call for changes in the violent, drug-filled lifestyles of his people: “We gotta make a change/ It’s time for us as a people to start making some changes.” However, within that same call for change, he also presents the almost impossibility of escaping the realities of the hood: “Being real don’t appeal to the brother in you/ You gotta operate the easy way/ “I made a G today” but you made it in a sleazy way/ Selling crack to the kids, “I gotta get paid!”/ Well hey, but that’s the way it is.”

Therefore, as Tupac himself would repeatedly emphasize throughout interviews, his music consciously and purposefully contains, in addition to lyrics about materialistic excess and violence, themes of hope and strength for black women and others enduring life in the ghettos. Consequently, the violence, paranoia, hustle, and bravado of being famous and instantly wealthy in songs like “Fuck the World,” “I’m Getting Money,” and “All Eyez on Me”—

Homie this is Thug Life nigga and we all strapped  
 I been through hell and back and if I fail, black  
 Then it’s back to the corner where we sell crack  
 Some of you niggas is bustas, you runnin’ round

With these tramp-ass bitches, don't trust her  
 But don't cry, this world ain't prepared for us  
 A straight thug motherfucker who ain't scared to bust  
 Fuck the world!

Drinkin' liquor and I'm lookin' for a bitch to fuck  
 Rather die makin' money, than live poor and legal  
 As I slang another ounce, I wish it was a kilo  
 I need money in a major way  
 Time to fuck my girl, she getting' paid today, ha ha ha  
 I live Thug Life and let the money come to me  
 Cause they can never take the game from a young G

Straight to the depths of hell is where those cowards goin'  
 Well are you still down nigga, holla when you see me  
 And let these devils be sorry for the day they finally freed me  
 I got a caravan of niggas every time we ride  
 Hittin' motherfuckers up when we pass by  
 Until I die; live the life of a boss playa  
 Cause even when I'm high, fuck with me and get crossed later.

—must be balanced with the messages of encouragement and black solidarity in others like

“Better Dayz”:

Time to question our lifestyle, look how we live  
Smokin' weed like it ain't no thing, so even kids  
Wanna try now, then lie down and get ran through  
Nobody watches 'em, clockin' the evil man do  
Faced with the demons, addicted to hearin' victims screamin'  
Guess we was evil since birth, product of cursed semens  
Cause even our birthdays is cursed days  
A born thug in the first place, the worst ways  
I'd love to see the block in peace  
With no more dealers and crooked cops, the only way to stop the beast  
And only we can change  
It's up to us to clean up the streets, it ain't the same  
Too many murders, too many funerals and too many tears  
Just seen another brother buried plus I knew him for years  
Passed by his family, but what could I say?  
Keep yo' head up and try to keep the faith  
And pray for better days.

Perhaps most remarkable about this song is its acute analysis of the (historical) oppression of blacks. Lines such as "Guess we was evil since birth, product of cursed semens" show a remarkable recognition of the history of racist sentiments of blacks as cursed and inherently wicked ("Better Dayz"). Moreover, the irony of Tupac's calling an end to rampant drug use and violence in a song when many other of his songs glorify that very drug use and violence could not have been lost on Tupac himself. Rather, Tupac openly embraced the

contradictions of his lifestyle and music, acknowledging them as indicative of the double consciousness of his identity and gangsta rap culture as a whole.

Indeed, the same type of comparative study could be applied to issues of sexuality in Tupac's music. Whereas in songs like "I Get Around" Tupac boasts of his sexual prowess with women, in many others like "White Man's World," "Dear Mama," "Brenda's Got a Baby," and "Keep Ya Head Up," Tupac narrates (sometimes heart-breaking) tales of self-respect and independence for young black women. In "Keep Ya Head Up," for example, he states:

I give a holla to my sisters on welfare  
 Tupac cares, if don't nobody else care  
 And, I know they like to beat you down a lot  
 When you come around the block, brothers clown a lot  
 But please don't cry, dry your eyes, never let up  
 Forgive but don't forget, girl, keep your head up  
 And when he tells you you ain't nothin', don't believe him  
 And if he can't learn to love you, you should leave him  
 Cause sister, you don't need him.

Overall, then, the contradictions in Tupac's music neither validate its sometimes troublesome sentiments on women and violence nor invalidate its messages of hope and solidarity for black men and women. Instead, when taken together, these contradicting realms of Tupac's music represent in their totality the modern evolution of the divided African-American (religious) identity. Most significantly, Tupac channeled all these contradictions and paradoxes of the hood life into the figure of Christ, re-signifying and re-contextualizing the



Jesus of African-American religious history into a new Black Jesus that rejected the sacred religiosity of its predecessors and identified instead with the secular realities of the gangsta rapper.

On a very broad level, Tupac's music often contained religious themes and imagery, perhaps to the point that, as Dyson avers, he was "obsessed with God" (*Holler if You Hear Me* 202). While early rap music rarely contained any references to God or religion, being at first predominantly party music, the transition of rap music to the gangsta rap music of the late 1980s and 90s led to a lyrical and thematic change as well from the earlier music's "celebrations of life" to the later's "ruminations on death, and God" (Utley 4). In that sense, many of Tupac's lyrics can be read as a spiritual crisis where he "wrestles with a theodicy, the effort to square belief in God with the evil that prevails" (*Holler if You Hear Me* 129). Additionally, as Ebony Utley argues, the figure of God "as an ultimate authority" also "plays an important role in the maintenance of the gangsta identity" (4). More specifically, Utley argues that God talk in gangsta rap music provides artists with a rhetorical form of agency, authority, and power: "[Gangsta rappers] seek God to empower them to be respectable murderers, misogynists, and agents of mayhem in the hyperbolic worlds of their lyrics and videos" (7). Accordingly, the religious themes within Tupac's music could certainly be seen as both personal theodicies and rhetorical strategies of agency and authority. In "Lord Knows," Tupac fights suicidal thoughts and questions whether God will forgive him for his violent lifestyle:

Damn, another funeral, another motherfucker

Lord knows (repeat three times)

I smoke a blunt to take the paint out  
 And if I wasn't high, I'd probably try to blow my brains out  
 I'm hopeless, they should've killed me as a baby  
 And now they got me trapped In the storm, I'm goin' crazy  
 Forgive me; they wanna see me in my casket  
 And if I don't blast I'll be the victim of them bastards  
 I'm losing hope, they got me stressin', can the Lord forgive me  
 Got the spirit of a thug in me

Facing seemingly impossible odds and almost unbearable oppression/depression, Tupac's pleas to God, society, and himself in this song could be seen as an existential crisis—a search for personal meaning when no meaning seemingly exists.

Furthermore, in “Only God Can Judge Me” Tupac brazenly and rhetorically uses God talk as a form of agency and authentication as a gangsta figure:

Only God can judge me, that right?  
 (Only God can judge me now)  
 Only God baby, nobody else, nobody else  
 All you other motherfuckers get out my business, really  
 (Only God can judge me now)...

I'd rather die like a man than live like a coward  
 There's a ghetto up in Heaven and it's ours  
 Black Power, is what we scream as we dream in a paranoid state  
 And our fate, is a lifetime of hate

Dear Mama can you save me? And fuck peace  
 Cause the streets got our babies, we gotta eat  
 No more hesitation each and every black male's trapped  
 And they wonder why we suicidal runnin' round strapped  
 Mister police: please try to see that there's  
 A million motherfuckers stressing just like me  
 Only God can judge me.

Whereas the first song's existential questions about God and life in the hood are characterized by sorrow and depression, there is a noticeable change in tone in "Only God Can Judge Me." Pleas of forgiveness are replaced by avowals of vengeance and retaliation, with God becoming an authorizing figure for his lifestyle. To that effect, the very phrase "only God can judge me" has been repeated ad nauseam in gangsta rap records since.

Nevertheless, while scholars like Dyson and Utley may rightly point out these two functions of God talk or rhetoric in the gangsta rap of Tupac (and other artists), what they ignore are the ways Tupac's religious sensibilities speak to an evolution of the African-American conception of religion from its inception in slavery. In relation to the substantivist and functionalist definitions of religion that have framed this study, each of their positions privileges one conception of religion over the other. Dyson's analysis of Tupac's music as an internal, existential search for (religious) meaning—a theodicy—is based upon a sui generis formulation of religion as feeling and personal belief, whereas Utley's study of the rhetorical strategies behind the God talk in Tupac's lyrics aligns with a functionalist conception of religion where what is deemed religious is determined by its socio-cultural function, and not by any inherent religiosity. Though both certainly make valid arguments, what they overlook

is the historical progression and evolution of African-American religion in Tupac's music and how the contextual realities of his era impacted are reflected in his evolution of African-American religion. As I have shown in the previous chapters on the slave songs, blues, and Harlem Renaissance, to do so would necessitate analyzing Tupac's music through the dual lenses and interpretive frameworks of both substantivist and functionalist definitions of religion—especially in how they relate to notions of the sacred and the profane. A substantivist view of religion can give us insight into how Tupac's music expresses the modern manifestation of the African-American divided religious identity and the ways in which religion has continued to serve as a matrix for blacks throughout history both to understand themselves and the world around them and to construct their own identities. In that sense, his existential search for meaning reveals, above all, the historical double consciousness of the African-American religious identity. Furthermore, a functionalist view of religion allows us to study how Tupac's music represents an evolution of that divided African-American religious identity through a deconstructive re-signification and re-contextualization of Christianity. Such a functionalist approach acknowledges both how the sacred and profane structure of African-American Christianity remained intact in the slaves' first Signification upon their masters' hegemonic employment of Christianity and how Tupac's music, like the artists of the blues and the Harlem Renaissance era before him, deconstructively plays with the sacred/profane signifiers of Christianity.

In turning to Tupac's creation of a Black Jesus, a "thugafication"—as Pinn coins—of the Jesus of the slave songs and the Black Jesus of the Harlem Renaissance, we witness a remarkable and radical Signification upon the historical representations of Jesus in African-American religion discussed so far ("Introduction"). As Dyson notes, Tupac's Black Jesus is

truly a “new figure in black cultural history” (*Holler if You Hear Me* 285). Like the Massa Jesus of the slaves, Tupac’s Black Jesuz is a primarily a savior of shared suffering with oppressed African Americans—he fulfills the high priest role delineated in the book of Hebrews of “sympathize[ing] with our weaknesses” (Heb. 4:15). Moreover, like the artists of the Harlem Renaissance, he is also a physically black savior as well; that is, Tupac not only creates a Black Jesuz, he also identifies himself as that Black Jesuz in a manner that hearkens to the identifications of Jesus as a black lynched victim in the 1920s. Yet most significantly, Tupac’s Black Jesuz also deconstructs the sacred/profane signifiers of Christianity through his conception of Jesus as a savior who “smoke like we smoke/ Drink like we drink” (“Black Jesuz”). Such a radical conflation of the profane realities of the hood with the sacred person of Jesus alludes most clearly to the ways in which blues artists fused sacred religiosity with sexual promiscuity. As a product of the contextual realities he faced, then, Tupac’s Black Jesuz Signified upon the former representations of Jesus in a manner that might be seen in many ways as a literary pastiche—yet with a revisionary difference.

Biographically, Tupac consciously identified both with and as this Black Jesuz. Indeed, much of the reason why he has been conceived in popular culture—then and now—as a messianic figure is because of his personal presentation of his lifestyle. It was not simply in his music that Tupac formulated this radical new Black Jesuz—just as importantly, it was in his way of life as well. In various interviews, Tupac expressed his distrust and rejection of orthodox Christianity and identified himself as a Christ figure. In one of the last interviews he gave before his death on September 13, 1996, Tupac denounces all religions as man-made propaganda and presents his own reinterpretation of Christianity:

INTERVIEWER: What religion are you?

TUPAC: I'm the religion that to me is the realest religion there is. I try to pray to God every night unless I pass out. I learned this in jail, I talked to every God (member of the Five Percent Nation) there was in jail. I think that if you take one of the "o's" out of "good" it's "God," if you add a "d" to "evil," it's the "Devil." I think some cool motherfucker sat down a long time ago and said let's figure out a way to control motherfuckers. That's what they came up with—the Bible. Cause if God wrote the Bible, I'm sure there would have been a revised copy by now. Cause a lot of shit has changed. I've been looking for this revised copy—I still see that same old copy that we had from then. I'm not disrespecting anyone's religion, please forgive me if it comes off that way, I'm just stating my opinion. ("Tupac Shakur...")

After rejecting orthodox (African-American) Christianity for its inability to meet the modern realities of the hood ("a lot of shit has changed"), Tupac implicitly explains to the interviewer his own reinterpretation of Christianity—his "revised copy."

TUPAC: The Bible tells us that all these did [sic] because they suffered so much, that's what makes them special people. I got shot five times, and I got crucified to the media. And I walked through with the thorns on, and I had shit thrown on me, and I had the thief at the top; I told that nigga "I'll be back for you. Trust me, is not supposed to be going down, I'll be back." I'm not saying I'm Jesus, but I'm saying we go through that type of thing everyday. We don't part the Red Sea, but we walk through the hood without getting shot. We don't turn water to wine, but we turn dope fiends and dope heads into

productive citizens of society. We turn words into money. What greater gift can there be. So I believe God blesses us, I believe God blesses those that hustle. (“Tupac Shakur...”)

Though he denies claiming to be Jesus, Tupac’s reinterpretation of Christianity undoubtedly entails a re-signification and re-contextualization of Christianity that presents himself—and perhaps those like him—as new Christ figures. The profane realities of the hood are transformed into the sacred miracles of Jesus: turning “dope fiends and dope heads into productive citizens of society” and “words into money.” As Tupac continually emphasizes throughout the rest of the interview, the prosperity of churches—“Why Got need gold ceilings to talk to me?”—coupled with the sufferings of blacks living in the hood—“If God wanted to talk to me in a pretty spot like that, why the hell he send me here then? That makes ghetto kids not believe in God”—results in his revision of Christianity to meet the realities of the hood life and gangsta figures: “So that’s wrong religion—I believe in God. I believe God puts us wherever we want to be at. They didn’t make sense [sic] that God would put us in the ghetto. That means he wants us to work hard to get up out of here. That means he’s testing us even more (“Tupac Shakur...”).

Furthermore, as briefly mentioned by Tupac in this interview, his remarkable, speedy recovery after being shot five times by three men (he would later check out of the hospital three hours after surgery), subsequent sentencing to prison for rape charges soon after, and constant feuding with other well-known artists of his time all added to his image as a persecuted, suffering black savior of the ghettos. As he said in another interview:

INTERVIEWER: What distinguishes you from everybody else?

TUPAC:... We got to kill this nigger-itis. Niggas hate me just ‘cause of what you doin’, niggas plotting on you ‘cause of women, and niggas hatin’ to see you shine. We got to kill that. Before we can kill it in our black nation, we got to kill it in the Hip Hop Nation, and that’s what I’m doin’. It’s the only reason I’m back: to bring the heat. And I feel like God is tellin’ me to do it. I feel like Black Jesus is controlling me. He’s our saint that we pray to; that we look up to. Drug dealers, they sinning, right? But they’ll be millionaires. How I got shot five times—only a saint, only Black Jesus, only a nigga that know where I’m coming from, could be like, “You know what? He’s gonna end up doing some good.” I gotta do that. (Mariott)

Tupac’s descriptions of those he perceived as “plotting” against him unmistakably draws allusions to the Pharisees who sought to plot against and kill Jesus. His portrayal of himself as one who has come back from near-death to bring change to his community speaks to his identification as a Christ-like figure. In presenting himself as a man sent from God himself, Tupac’s assertion that “Black Jesus is controlling me” reveals his own identification as that Black Jesus as well.

Consequently, these reinterpretations of orthodox Christianity and its central figure Jesus are prevalent throughout Tupac’s music. In “Thugz Mansion,” Tupac envisions a new heaven where—much like the blues preacher who desired an afterlife where he can freely act upon his sexual desires with as many women as possible—gangstas and drug dealers can find the peace and comfort to engage in their illicit activities: “...and even though we G’s/ We still visualize places, that we can roll in peace/ And in my mind’s eye I see this place, the



players go in fast/ I got a spot for us all, so we can ball, at thug's mansion." In "Hail Mary," Tupac re-signifies and re-contextualizes the traditional Catholic prayer to Mary into a prayer of vengeance against his perceived enemies. In the opening lines, he presents himself as the Son of God who will judge the wicked: "And God said he should send his one begotten son/ To lead the wild into the ways of the man/ Follow me! Eat my flesh, flesh of my flesh." And as the cover of this posthumous album depicting Tupac as the crucified Christ hanging on the cross suggests, by the time of his death he was widely seen as the Black Jesuz he so readily identified with and as.

Of all his songs, the suffering Black Jesuz of the hood can be seen most clearly in his song appropriately entitled "Black Jesuz." In the opening verse, Tupac poses his generation's search for a new Jesus:

Searching for Black Jesus

Oh yea, sportin' jewels and shit, yahnahmean? [sic: know what I mean?]

(Black Jesus; you can be Christian

Baptist, Jehovah Witness)

Straight tatted up, no doubt, no doubt

(Islamic, won't matter to me

I'm a thug; thugs, we praise Black Jesus, all day)

What is distinctive about the hood's Black Jesus/z is not his theological allegiance—"you can be Christian/Baptist, Jehovah Witness" or "Islamic"—but his identification with the hood life of "thugs" who "praise Black Jesus, all day." The (Black) Jesus of the slaves and the artists of the Harlem Renaissance is re-interpreted as a gangsta Jesus who can relate to the earthly, secular realities of the thug life. Accordingly, the hook of the songs repeats:

All hail, the pressure no endeavour can fail  
 Some missin' souls turn to hoes when exposed to jail  
 In times of war we need somebody raw, rally the troops  
 Like a saint that we can trust to help to carry us through  
 Black Jesus

As a re-signification and re-contextualization of the Jesus of times past, the Black Jesus of gangsta rap is not only a figure of suffering but of freedom and liberty as well—a “raw” Savior who can “rally the troops” and “carry us through.” In that regard, Tupac’s Black Jesus might be seen in some ways as a pastiche of the Jesus of the slaves who was both a suffering savior and a triumphant king; yet that pastiche, as discussed, entails a radical difference or revision.

Furthermore, as the song progresses, Tupac’s search for a new Black Jesus results in his self-identification and declaration as that Black Jesus figure:

Cops patrol projects, hatin' the people living in them  
 I was born an inmate, waitin' to escape the prison  
 Went to church but don't understand it, they underhanded  
 God gave me these commandments, the world is scandalous  
 Blast til they holy high; baptize they evil minds  
 Wise, no longer blinded, watch me shine trick  
 Which one of y'all wanna feel the degrees?  
 Bitches freeze facin' Black Jesus.

In his modern, revisionist account of the life of Jesus, Tupac proclaims himself as a radical Black Jesus/z of violence born within the oppressions of the ghetto and police brutality.

Rejecting the Jesus of the church and, by extension, the African-American religious tradition, Tupac sanctifies his violent actions—“Blast til they holy high: baptize they evil minds”—through a sanctioning from God above (“God gave me these commandments”). With his gun pointed at white society, he deifies himself as the Son of God: “Which one of y’all wanna feel the degrees?/ Bitches freeze facin’ Black Jesus.” Like the black lynched Jesus of the Harlem Renaissance, Tupac’s identification as this gangsta Black Jesus subverts the systemic oppressions faced by blacks in the ghettos by redeeming that hood culture through the divine nature of Jesus. As Dyson asserts, “The more radically Black Jesus could be identified with society’s outlaws, the better he was, in Tupac’s view, to redeem his ghetto adherents” (*Open Mike* 281). Thus, by reinterpreting Jesus as a black gangsta who participated in the illicit actions of those in the hood, Tupac attempts to overthrow those oppressive systems that made it impossible for such black men and women to escape those very realities.

What is remarkable, then, about Tupac’s identification as this Black Jesus is its deeper recognition of the historical division of the black religious identity—of the “(theo)logical contradictions at the heart of meaning-making in conventional religion,” particularly African-American religion (*Open Mike* 284). As a conscious awareness of the hegemonic forces of American society that divide the African-American religious identity, Tupac’s internal division entails a clash between the sacred Jesus of (black) religious tradition and the profane Jesus of the hood life. From the slaves’ paradoxical reclamation of the religion designed to subjugate them to the eventual division within the black community post-Emancipation over sacred religiosity and the profane, Tupac’s music evinces the modern evolution of that divided religious identity in its re-contextualization of the (black) Jesus of African-American religion.

Following his sudden death, Tupac's legacy would impact the (gangsta) rap music of many artists for years to come. One example is the incredibly influential rapper Nas (Nasir Jones). Throughout his catalogue, Nas has followed in Tupac's footsteps in conflating the life of the gangsta with the life of Jesus Christ. The very title of some of his albums—*It Was Written* (1996), *God's Son* (2002), and *Street's Disciple* (2004)—reflect his Signification upon and pastiche of Tupac's work (the cover of his 2008 album *Untitled* shows Nas's back lashed in a manner referential to both the slaves and the scourging of Jesus by Pilate). His song "God Loves Us" could be seen as a sequel to Tupac's "Black Jesuz":

God love us hood niggas (I know)  
 Cause next to Jesus on the cross was the crook niggas (I know)  
 And the killers, God love us good niggas (I know)  
 Cause on the streets is the hood niggas  
 And I know he feels us,  
 God love us hood niggas  
 Cause he be with us in the prisons  
 And he takes time to listen,  
 God loves us hood niggas  
 Cause next to Jesus on the cross was the crook niggas,  
 But he forgive us

In the (post)modern music of Kanye West, however, Tupac's Black Jesus becomes radically re-envisioned in a manner that re-signifies and re-contextualizes even further the manner in which Tupac Signified upon the African-American religious tradition. The

suffering Jesus figures of the slave songs to the gangsta rap of Tupac becomes transformed into a god and savior of materialistic excess and decadence.

## II

Only a brief knowledge of the history of Kanye West is required to be familiar with the constant controversy and media attention and outrage that characterizes his life. His infamous statement on live television during a charity event for the Hurricane Katrina disaster—in which he stated forthrightly into the camera that “George Bush doesn’t care about black people”—is only one example (“George Bush Hates...”). Nevertheless, regardless of one’s opinion concerning his personality, West’s status and symbol as the changing face of current rap music, a genre which has irrefutably affected in a significant manner black and white culture, is unquestionable. As Dawn Boeck summarizes: “Through his career as a producer, rapper, singer, director, writer, artist, designer, celebrity, and social critic, West has solidified his position as a facet of American culture” (209). It comes as no surprise, then, that *Time* has recently placed West at the very top of its “100 Most Influential People” list of 2015, describing him in the magazine issue as “a pop-culture juggernaut” (Musk). Throughout his albums to date—*The College Dropout* (2004), *Late Registration* (2005), *Graduation* (2007), *808s & Heartbreak* (2008), *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2010), and *Yeezus* (2013)—West has continually moved rap in new sonic and thematic directions. While the extravagant and unabashed nature of his personal character certainly has drawn the ire of spectators and critics alike, his musical creativity has consistently been recognized for its important contributions to the genre of rap music in particular and popular music as a whole.

His most recent album *Yeezus* was released in 2013 to general critical acclaim. Many critics and scholars lauded its pro-black messages and railings against institutional racism. Musically, Jon Dolan of *Rolling Stone* deemed the album “the darkest, most extreme music Kanye has ever cooked up, an extravagantly abrasive album full of grinding electro, pummeling minimalist hip-hop, drone-y wooz and industrial gear-grinding” (“Kanye West”). Throughout the concise ten tracks on the album, West delves into the past and present state of race relations in American society. The very title of some of the songs—“Black Skinhead,” “New Slaves,” “Blood on the Leaves”—make evident the history of black nationalism and political activism which he draws upon. Like Tupac, West’s family was heavily involved in political activism: his father, though not too involved in his life, was a former Black Panther, and his mother was an English professor at Clark Atlanta University. Moreover, what is distinct in West’s new album as opposed to his prior works dealing with similar topics of race and decadence is the radically new sacrilegious (black) Jesus that emerges. As West proclaimed at a pre-release, listening party, the album’s title indicates a conscious recognition and revision of the history of black religious thought: “West was my slave name; Yeezus is my God name” (Makarechi). Accordingly, in the album West proclaims himself as a new Christ figure, thereby expressing a (post)modern continuation of the Du Boisian double consciousness of the African-American religious identity. To begin, however, we must look at the figure of Jesus in West’s earlier music in order to understand the radical nature of the Jesus in his newest work. Whereas the Jesus of his first album might be seen as a Signification upon and pastiche of the suffering (black) Jesus of African-American history (and more specifically, Tupac’s Black Jesuz), the Jesus/Yeezus of his latest album evinces a completely new revision and transformation.

In his seminal debut album *The College Dropout*, West consciously Signifies upon the African-American literary, artistic, and religious traditions in a manner that re-contextualizes them for the 2000s. The sequential order of the fifth and sixth tracks on the album—“I’ll Fly Away” and “Spaceship”—is just one example that captures West’s revisionary, Signifyin(g) process. The former consists of a short cover of the traditional hymn by a church choir accompanied by a piano. As a song ostensibly about flying away to heaven after one’s death, its straightforward rendition and placement early in the album foregrounds West’s conscious Signification upon his African-American heritage—what Boeck terms as his “renewed historicism” (209). Moreover, in the song following right after, West re-signifies and re-contextualizes the hymn into a song about his desires as a black man to escape the present-day realities of American society. As the song’s hook and first verse illustrates, West transforms the notions of flying and spiritual escape in “I’ll Fly Away” into an Afro-futuristic, neo-hymn about the paradoxical struggles of black men to rise above the racist sentiments against them, instead of giving in to them:

I’ve been workin’ this graveshift, and I ain’t made shit

I wish I could buy me a spaceship and fly past the sky (repeat twice)

If my manager insults me again

I will be assaulting him

After I fuck the manager up

Then I’m gonna shorten the register up

Let’s go back, back to the Gap

Look at my check, wasn’t no scratch

So if I stole, wasn't my fault  
 Yeah I stole, never got caught  
 They take me to the back and pat me  
 Askin' me about some khakis  
 But let some black people walk in  
 I bet you they show off their token black-y  
 Oh now they love Kanye, let's put him all in the front of the store

West's humorous depiction of the complex dynamics of racism in this song—the employee narrator both rails against the racist stereotyping by his manager yet also self-fulfills some of those same racist sentiments about his predilections for stealing as a young black male—evinces on a more fundamental level the internal struggles and double consciousness of the modern day African-American identity.

Throughout the rest of this album (and others), West poignantly captures the contradictions and temptations faced by the new generation of blacks who seek equality through materialistic excess and riches. This is perhaps best seen in his hit song “All Falls Down,” where West brings to the forefront issues of internalized racism and decadent living that characterize the double consciousness of many African Americans:

Man I promise, I'm so self-conscious  
 That's why you always see me with at least one of my watches  
 Rollies and Pasha's done drove me crazy  
 I can't even pronounce nothing, pass that ver-say-see!  
 Then I spent like four hundred bucks on this  
 Just to be like, nigga you ain't up on this



And I can't even go to the grocery store  
 Without some ones that's clean and a shirt with a team  
 It seems we living the American Dream  
 But the people highest up got the lowest self-esteem  
 The prettiest people do the ugliest things  
 For the road to riches and diamond rings  
 We shine because they hate us, floss cause they degrade us  
 We trying to buy back our 40 acres  
 And for that paper, look how low we a stoop  
 Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe.

In exposing the insecurities motivating the materialistic bravado of most rappers (including himself) and significant portions of black culture at large, West powerfully depicts the self-destructive cycle of racism in American society and its effects upon the double consciousness of many African Americans. The futile attempts to “buy back our 40 acres” through “riches and diamond rings” comes to a climax in the final verse of the song in West’s contradictory response to his acknowledgement of the vanity of materialism:

I say fuck the police, that's how I treat 'em  
 We buy our way out of jail, but we can't buy freedom  
 We'll buy a lot of clothes when we don't really need em  
 Things we buy to cover up what's inside  
 Cause they make us hate ourself and love they wealth  
 That's why shorty's hollerin' “where the ballers at?”  
 Drug dealers buy Jordans, crackhead but crack

And a white man get paid off of all of that  
 But I ain't even gonna act holier than thou  
 Cause fuck it, I went to Jacob with twenty-five thou[sand]  
 Before I had a house and I'd do it again  
 Cause I want to be on 106 and Park pushin' a Benz  
 I want to act ballerific like it's all terrific  
 I got a couple past due bills, I won't get specific  
 I got a problem with spendin' before I get it  
 We all self-conscious, I'm just the first to admit it.

In admitting to his own desires to “act ballerific” and subsequently spend twenty-five thousand dollars on jewelry at Jacob’s, West embraces the contradictions of “buy[ing] to cover up what’s inside.” This contradiction inherent within the double consciousness of West’s identity expressed in the verse above—the simultaneous recognition that “they make us hate ourselves and love they wealth” yet conscious decision regardless to continue living and spending lavishly—is the hallmark of all of his music.

Taken in its entirety, then, West’s first album can be seen as a microcosm of the themes and issues he deals with throughout his later works—particularly the contradictions of the divided black (religious) identity. As Geroge Ciccariello-Maher rightly observes: “Kanye West’s first album, *College Dropout*, can be understood in many ways as a direct expression of the anguished, divided self, torn apart by the ‘warring ideals’ of the Black American and specifically one whose simultaneous access to education and exposure to the racist veil ensures that this anguish will be at its most extreme” (386). Moreover, by drawing upon “a critical awareness of his past,” he “offers his own perspective on the present, and

constructs a vision of the future that seeks to expand beyond limiting social constraints” (Boeck 213). That is, his Signification upon the African-American tradition leads to his modern day revisions of those historical themes. In that regard, the most striking example of West’s artistic Signifyin(g) process is his first major radio hit “Jesus Walks.” Within this song, West’s presents an artistic pastiche of and homage to the suffering (black) Jesus figures of black history, thus further foregrounding his music within his African-American heritage.

Within its opening lines, West establishes his Signification upon the suffering Jesus of black religious tradition:

We at war

We at war with terrorism, racism

But most of all we at war with ourselves

(Jesus walks)

God show me the way because the Devil tryna break me down

(Jesus walks with me)

The recognition that “we at war with ourselves” immediately speaks to the historical double consciousness of the African-American religious identity; furthermore, the subsequent repetition that “Jesus walks with me” evinces a companionship with Jesus amidst the oppressions of society that can be traced all the way back to the religion of the slaves. As the song continues, the nature of this Jesus becomes evident as a clear pastiche of the suffering Black Jesuz of Tupac’s gangsta rap:

To the hustlers, killers, murderers, drug dealers, even the scrippers

(Jesus walks for them)

To the victims of welfare for we livin' in Hell here, hell yeah  
 (Jesus walks for them)...

Like Tupac's Black Jesus, the Jesus of West's song identifies with blacks surviving in the ghettos and whose lifestyles are marked by illicit activities. The three music videos released for this song featuring an African American playing the role of Jesus walking through the degradations of the ghettos confirm his Signification upon Tupac's Black Jesus.

Furthermore, as the song concludes, West reveals how this Jesus embodies his internal crisis between the secular realities and materialistic expectations of American society and the sacred religiosity of his heritage:

I ain't here to argue about his facial features  
 Or here to convert atheists into believers  
 I'm just tryna say the way school need teachers  
 The way Kathie Lee needed Regis, that's the way I need Jesus  
 So here go my single, dog, radio needs this  
 They say you can rap about anything except for Jesus  
 That means guns, sex, lies, videotape  
 But if I talk about God my record won't get played, huh?  
 Well if this take away from my spins  
 Which'll probably take away from my ends  
 Then I hope this take away from my sins

West's final lines depicts the division of his black religious identity as a conflict between his need for Jesus and the pleasures of the world. Also, in addition to being a clear pastiche of Tupac's Black Jesus, West's assertion that the "facial features" of Jesus do not matter

signifies as well a connection to the Jesus of the slaves (and, much later, Martin Luther King, Jr.), where the emphasis was placed upon an identification with Jesus's egalitarian principles rather than his physical color or ethnicity. Consequently, as a conscious contribution to the legacy of African-American religious thought, West's Jesus both embodies the conflicts of the divided black religious identity and continues the representation of Jesus as primarily a companion and figure of shared suffering. It is no surprise, then, that West posed as Jesus (donning a crown of thorns and a red robe with his face bloodied with cuts and abrasions) for the cover of an issue of *Rolling Stone* in 2006—a gesture that openly signaled his embracement of his religious and artistic heritage and, perhaps subconsciously, his eventual identification as a radical new Jesus figure in his albums to come.

Throughout his next several albums, these issues of the contradictions inherent within the double consciousness of many African Americans remain prevalent and largely unchanged. In the remix version of “Diamonds From Sierra Leone” from his 2005 album *Late Registration*, West highlights again the contradiction of buying and wearing lavish jewelry while having the knowledge of its vanity and, in this specific song, its troubled West African history:

My chain, these ain't conflict diamonds  
 Is they Jacob? Don't lie to me, man  
 See, a part of me sayin' "Keep shining"  
 How? When I know what a blood diamond is  
 Though it's thousands of miles away  
 Sierra Leone connects to what we go through today  
 Over here it's a drug trade, we die from drugs

Over there they die from what we buy from drugs  
 The diamonds, the chains, the bracelets, the charms [sic: charms]  
 I thought my Jesus-piece was so harmless  
 Til I seen a picture of a shorty armless  
 And here's the conflict  
 It's in a black person soul to rock that gold  
 Spend your whole life trying to get that nice...  
 How can somethin' so wrong make me feel so right?

Similar to the internal conflict between the accumulation of riches and independence from the self-destructive cycle of those riches expressed in “All Falls Down,” West further problematizes the materialistic desires of many African Americans (primarily himself) for extravagant jewelry by highlighting the troublesome West African origins of “blood diamonds.” Most significantly, his specific identification of his “Jesus-piece” as problematic speaks to the conflict of the divided black religious identity. As a wearable piece of diamond-studded jewelry, the Jesus piece symbolically represents a “connect[ion] [between] Christianity and capitalism” (Utley 50). West’s decision whether to wear his Jesus piece or not, then, becomes further complicated by the conflation of Jesus with jewelry made from blood diamonds. As Utley writes:

The Jesus piece can be interpreted as reparations—an opportunity for African Americans to receive something in return from the unpaid labor of their slave ancestors. In these instances, the Jesus piece is a reminder that African descendants are no longer in chains. Being able to afford such a lavish emblem partially levels the playing field between whites whose privilege rests

in their racial status and blacks who acquire privilege through a newfound class status. (67)

Consequently, West's internal conflict over wearing his Jesus piece jewelry evinces at the most fundamental level the division of his religious identity. Though he acknowledges the violent history of the diamonds he wears—and the futility in achieving racial equality through materialistic excess—he still desires to wear the capitalistic “lavish emblem” that ironically bears the face of Jesus, the suffering savior and companion.

Nevertheless, like the conclusion to “All Falls Down,” West resolves his internal crisis in the song by defiantly embracing the contradictions of his double consciousness: “People asking me ‘Is I’m gon’ give my chain back?’/ That’ll be the same day I give the game back.” Thus, after spending over twenty lines setting up the conflict of the paradoxical desire in “a black person[‘s] soul to rock that gold,” West somewhat flippantly proclaims his decision, nonetheless, to continue his lavish lifestyle and diamond-wearing. Therefore, while Ciccariello-Maher avers that West debunks in this song the ability of African Americans to prove their humanity through materialistic excess by “demonstrating the inhumanity that can result from attempting to do so while neglecting broader socioeconomic structures,” he ignores West's own embracement in the song of those same contradictory lifestyle choices (393).

Similarly, in the song “Can’t Tell Me Nothing” from his 2007 album *Graduation*, West again expresses both an acknowledgment of the crisis of double consciousness and perpetuation of that crisis through a conscious decision:

I had a dream I could buy my way to heaven  
When I awoke, I spent that on a necklace

I told God I'd be back in a second  
 Man it's so hard not to act reckless  
 To whom much is given, much is tested  
 Get arrested guess until he get the message  
 I feel the pressure, under more scrutiny  
 And what I do, act more stupidly  
 Bought more jewelry, more Louis V  
 My Momma couldn't get through to me

Thus, in his recent album *Yeezus*, West's continual embracement of the contradictions of his divided religious identity climatically results in his transformation of the suffering Jesus of his earlier music into a sacrilegious, liberating figure of materialistic excess and decadence. The Jesus of the slave songs, the Harlem Renaissance, and gangsta rap music of Tupac becomes further re-signified and re-contextualized by West into a radically new, subversive figure. Furthermore, his self-proclamation as this hedonist Jesus (i.e. Yeezus) can be seen as a postmodern evolution of the divided black religious identity.

Nevertheless, despite its radical departure from his earlier work, *Yeezus* still contains the "renewed historicism" and hallmark themes of his previous albums. Like the revision of black history that occurs in the transition from "I'll Fly Away" to "Spaceship" on his first album, the song "Blood on the Leaves" on *Yeezus* models a similar Signification upon the African-American tradition. As the title suggests, West frames the song by sampling Nina Simone's rendition of Billie Holiday's famous song about lynching. By doing so, he again foregrounds his music firmly within the historical lineage of black music and, subsequently, establishes his revision of that artistic tradition. As Tricia Rose implies, the very art of



sampling within rap music speaks to the Signifyin(g) process of the black artistic tradition: “...prior to rap, the most desirable use of a sample was to mask the sample and its origin; to bury its identity. Rap producers have inverted this logic, using samples as a point of reference, as a means by which the process of repetition and recontextualization can be highlighted and privileged” (73). In West’s revision of Holiday’s song, consequently, the themes of lynching become reinterpreted into themes about troubled relationships and the tragic effects of fame on love:

We could’ve been somebody  
 ‘stead had to tell somebody  
 Let’s take it back to the first party  
 When you tried your first molly  
 And came out of your body (repeat twice)  
 Running naked down the lobby  
 And you was screamin’ that love you me  
 Before the limelight tore ya  
 Before the limelight stole ya  
 Remember we were so young  
 When I would hold you  
 Before the blood on the leaves  
 I know there ain’t wrong with me  
 Something strange is happenin’

Furthermore, the powerful single “New Slaves,” like “All Falls Down” and “Diamonds of Sierra Leone (Remix)” before it, exposes the continued presence of systemic racism in the world today:

My momma was raised in the era when  
 Clean water was only served to the fairer skin  
 Doin’ clothes you would have thought I had help  
 But they wasn’t satisfied unless I picked the cotton myself  
 You see it’s broke nigga racism  
 That’s that “Don’t touch anything in the store”  
 And it’s rich nigga racism  
 That’s that “Come in, please buy more”  
 “What you want, a Bentley? Fur coat? A diamond chain?  
 All you blacks want all the same things”  
 Used to only be niggas, now everybody playin’  
 Spendin’ everything on Alexander Wang  
 New slaves.

The social injustice of having to drink from a separate water fountain than whites experienced by West’s mother decades ago is translated by West in the song to a new, sinister form of oppression for particular successful blacks: “rich nigga racism.” As opposed to the “broke nigga racism” of his mother’s time, the racist systems enforced upon certain blacks in modern society focus on the manipulation of the new-found wealth of a class formerly characterized by poverty and violence. This idea of a socio-cultural identity founded upon the non-normative accumulation of wealth through means other than

traditional (white) systems such as education, inheritance, or Wall Street business is certainly nothing new—it can be traced back to the commercialization of black music throughout history.

West's revolt against the systematic racism in place against African Americans is just as paradoxically brazen and self-perpetuating to the system as his earlier music:

I know that we the new slaves  
 I see the blood on the leaves  
 They throwing hate at me  
 Want me to stay at ease  
 Fuck you and your corporation  
 Y'all niggas can't control me  
 I know that we the new slaves (repeat twice)  
 I'm bout to wild the fuck out  
 I'm going Bobby Boucher...  
 Y'all throwing contracts at me  
 You know that niggas can't read...  
 Meanwhile the DEA  
 Teamed up with the CCA  
 They tryna lock niggas up  
 They tryna make new slaves

West's recognition of the hegemonic systems of commercialism, capitalism, and institutional incarceration in place results in his paradoxical revolt of decadence and materialism against the neo-slavery of American society. His Signification again upon Holiday's "Strange Fruit"

foregrounds his exposing of racism in the world today within the historical oppression of blacks. In the conclusion to the song, moreover, West's protest devolves into threats of sexual violence against white women:

They prolly [probably] all in the Hamptons  
 Braggin' 'bout what they made  
 Fuck you and your Hampton house  
 I'll fuck your Hampton spouse  
 Came on her Hampton blouse  
 And in her Hampton mouth

As scholars and critics have rightly noted, West's final lines of protest in the song cannot be viewed as anything other than misogynistic. As in his contradictory embrace of the lavish lifestyles that he acknowledges as implicit to the hegemonic designs of racist institutions, West's resorting to sexual violence by the end of the song self-fulfills the stereotypes of black males as licentious savages. Yet as the title of another song on the album, "Black Skinhead," suggests, West seemingly delights in subversively re-appropriating stereotypes, though he may not always be completely successful.

Accordingly, in the third song of *Yeezus*, "I Am a God"—a microcosm of the entire album—these contradictions of West's divided religious identity come to a climax in the dual figures of the sacrilegious Jesus/Yeezus. The repeating hook of the song establishes West's self-deification and identification as a God/Christ-like figure:

I am a god  
 Hurry up with my damn massage  
 Hurry up with my damn ménage

Get the Porsche out the damn garage

I am a god

Even though I'm a man of God

My whole life in the hands of God

So y'all better quit playin' with God

After claiming deity through the simple statement of "I am a god," West employs his status as a godhead with demands of sexual promiscuity and wealth. Like the blues' deconstruction of religion through a fusion of the sacred and sexual, the opposing forces of sacred religiosity and profane materialism/sexual excess within West's divided religious identity converge into a sacrilegious hybrid of contradictions.

The second verse of the song reifies this fusion of the sacred and profane within West's divided religious identity:

I just talked to Jesus

He said, "What up, Yeezus?"

I said, "Shit I'm chillin'

Tryna stack these millions"

I know he the most high

But I am a close high

Mi casa, su casa

That's our cosa nostra

I am a god (repeat three times)

As in Tupac's song "Black Jesuz," the conversation in this verse reveals West's conscious recognition of the double consciousness of his religious identity. The vernacular of Jesus

strongly suggests his identification as a re-signification and re-contextualization of the (black) Jesus of the African-American religious tradition while the deified moniker of “Yeezus” (and his decadent response of “Tryna stack these millions”) expresses West’s identification as a Christ figure as well. Hence, the relationship of “the most high” (Jesus) to “a close high” (Yeezus/West) maintains the distinction of these personas or identities. In other words, West is both clearly Signifyin(g) upon the Jesus of black religious thought in his creation of a sacrilegious Jesus and also self-identifying as that same sacrilegious Christ figure on earth. The last lines—“Mi casa, su casa/ That’s our cosa nostra”—emphasizes West’s both identification with and as this radical sacrilegious Jesus.

This conflation of materialistic excess with Christianity and deconstructive fusion of the sacred with the sexual can be found in other songs of West, both on this album and others released during this time period. In “Sanctified,” a song released in 2014 on an album from rap artist Rick Ross, the sacrilegious themes of “I Am a God” are reified in the song’s juxtaposition of gospel music with the decadence and lavishness of rap music. Accordingly, the song ostensibly begins with Betty Wright’s heartfelt singing about the salvific work of God in her life:

There’s a field with angels movin’ around me  
 I just worship thee, for all he’s done for me  
 It’s a new day, I have been born again  
 I’ve been born again, I’ve been born again  
 In His spirit, and His name, I’m sanctified!  
 Lord, I testify; he’s right by my side  
 I believe it be, His word is so clear to me.

However, in the song's first verse, West re-interprets the conversion experience of the opening lines of gospel music into a religion of materialistic excess: "Pass me thirty bottles, champagne procession/ That's that holy water, sanctified refreshments." Therefore, West deconstructively empties the religious concepts of conversion and sanctification of their prior sacred meanings and re-signifies them into a new, sacrilegious religion.

Moreover, in "I'm In It," the sixth track on *Yeezus*, West evinces a fusion of the sacred and profane/sexual structure of Christianity by conflating explicit expressions of sexual desire with lines from a slave song:

Damn your lips very soft  
 As I turn my Blackberry off  
 And I turn your bathwater on  
 And you turn off your iPhone  
 Careless whispers, eyes fuckin', bitin' ass  
 Neck, ears, hair, legs, eating ass  
 Your pussy's too good, I need to crash  
 Your titties, let 'em out, free at last  
 Thanks God almighty, they free at last

The somewhat shocking pairing of the song's opening lines of sex with a slave song about spiritual freedom hearkens to the similar blues' deconstruction of religion through a fusing of the sacred with the sexual.

Finally, in "No Church in the Wild," a song released on a collaborative album with rap artist Jay-Z in 2011, West again expresses a deconstruction of Christianity's sacred and profane structure:

Coke on her black skin  
 Made a stripe like a zebra, I call that jungle fever  
 You will not control the threesome  
 Just roll the weed up until I get me some  
 We formed a new religion  
 No sons as long as there's permission  
 And deception is the only felony  
 To never fuck nobody without telling me

Though scholars like Monica Miller and Utley are correct in analyzing the rhetorical strategies of West in using God talk, they ignore the historical evolution evinced in West's deconstructive Signification upon the history of African-American religion. For example, Miller states: "...West capitalizes on the weight of god-language in order to situate *himself* as the Most High in the rap game, letting the listening public know that like god, he too sits on a public throne and deserves similar respect" ("God of the New Slaves" 172-73). Likewise, Utley writes that "black men gain power over white supremacy through self-deification" (93). Nevertheless, while their analysis of the rhetorical uses of God talk in West's (and other rapper's) music certainly speaks to the hubris and masculine bravado characterizing much of the genre, their over-emphasis on the rhetorical strategies behind the use of certain religious signifiers (like "God" or "Jesus") tends to overlook the vast, historical lineage and weight behind those very signifiers and subsequently treats rap music/popular culture as historically autonomous products. Even with a functionalist approach to religion, the claim that the religious content of West's music is solely a "lyrical interplay, where the concept of god is simply used as a stand-in for claims about the artist's own hubris and power" unnecessarily



negates studies into how West Signifies upon the African-American religious tradition and revises it in a radical way (“God of the New Slaves” 173).

Therefore, when analyzed within the lineage, progression, and evolutions of African-American religion and its central figure in Jesus Christ, West’s early music can be seen as Signifyin(g) upon Tupac’s Black Jesus of his late 1990s gangsta rap; however, more significantly, West also revises the tradition of Tupac by subverting the function of his suffering Black Jesus into a sacrilegious Jesus of materialistic excess and wealth. Whereas Tupac’s Black Jesus revises the tradition of the suffering Jesus of black religious tradition by identifying him with the profane, illicit realities of the hood culture, West further revises the historical representations of (Black) Jesus by subverting its function as a symbol of suffering into one of liberating hedonism. Consequently, West’s identification as this radical, sacrilegious Jesus marks a departure from the lineage of black religious thought discussed throughout this study. Instead of seeking a co-suffering Savior to protest against the enslaving systems of commercialism and institutional incarceration like his artistic predecessors, West creates a Jesus who—like the blues’ deconstruction of Christianity—evinces the (post)modern evolution of the divided African-American religious identity, destroying in the process the Du Boisian veil separating the two.

## Conclusion

In tracing the evolutions of Jesus throughout the history of black art and religious thought, we have seen how the body of Christ has served as the site of socio-cultural, political, racial, and theological conflicts. The frameworks of both race and religion interact and collide in the historical battles over the metaphysical significations and physical color of Christ. From the massa Jesus of the slave songs to the black lynched Jesus of the Harlem Renaissance—from the Black Jesus of Tupac Shakur to the sacrilegious Yeezus/Jesus of Kanye West—each representation of Christ has reflected the contextual realities of African Americans of the given era. Moreover, these changing representations of Jesus from one era to the next reveal the ways in which African Americans have both resisted the hegemonic deployments of Christ(ianity) by white society and Signified upon their own black religious and artistic heritage.

In that regard, the birth of the divided African-American religious identity can be seen as the result of the slaves' resistance against the hegemonic religion of their masters through the paradoxical re-appropriating and reclaiming of that religion. By Signifying upon the egalitarian principles of Jesus's metaphorical and priestly offices/roles in Scripture and identifying with him as a savior and co-sufferer, enslaved blacks re-signified the symbolic meanings attached to metaphysical/metaphorical constructions of blackness and found within the figure of Christ a source of ontological and personal worth. After the Civil War, the transitional shift from antebellum to postbellum American society led to the transitional shift

from the slave songs to the blues. Whereas the slaves' divided religious identity was characterized by its paradoxical relationship to the religion of their masters, the music and religious identities of ex-slaves came to entail a division within the black community itself. In the postbellum evolution of the slaves' divided religious identity, the bluesmen and women both deconstructed the sacred and profane structure of (black) Christianity through a fusion of the sacred with the sexually promiscuous and parodied the black preacher of slave religion, creating in his stead the blues preacher.

This legacy of the blues would influence the artists of the Harlem Renaissance era in their representations of Jesus as a black lynched victim. Like the blues' Signification upon and deconstruction of the religion of the slaves, black artists of the 1920s re-signified and re-contextualized the massa Jesus of the slave songs in their reconfiguration of the slaves' relationship *with* Jesus to an identification *as* Jesus. Furthermore, their blackening of the whitewashed Jesus of mainstream American culture collapsed the sacred and profane structure of white Christianity by conflating the supposed profane blackness of their skin with the sacred whiteness of Jesus. These battles over the body of Christ during the Harlem Renaissance era would influence the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and the academic, black theological movements of the 1970s.

In the gangsta rap music of the late 1990s, a radical new Jesus figure emerged in the form of Tupac Shakur's Black Jesuz. As yet another re-signification and re-contextualization of the Jesus of African-American art and religious thought, Tupac's Black Jesuz rejected the sacred religiosity of his predecessors and identified instead with the secular or profane realities of the hood life and ghettos. Such a fusion of the sacredness of orthodox Christianity with the profaneness of the gangsta rapper persona and lifestyle alluded to the blues'

deconstructive interplay of the sacred/profane signifiers of Christianity and further illustrated the evolution of the divided African-American religious identity, especially in Tupac's simultaneous identification *with* Black Jesuz and *as* that same Black Jesuz.

Finally, in the (post)modern music of Kanye West, the entire history of black representations of Jesus is both repeated/referenced and transformed into a radically new, sacrilegious Jesus/Yeezus. While West's early music can be seen as a pastiche of the suffering (black) Jesus figures of the slave songs, the Harlem Renaissance, and particularly the Black Jesuz of Tupac's gangsta rap music, his most recent album *Yeezus* revises those representations of Jesus into a hedonistic savior of materialistic excess and sexual promiscuity. Like the black lynched Jesus of the 1920s and Tupac's Black Jesuz of the late 1990s, West also identifies himself as this decadent Jesus/Yeezus, evincing a postmodern evolution of the historical, divided religious identity of African Americans and a departure from the lineage of black religious thought (as represented in the suffering Jesus figure).

Ultimately, then, the history of black religious thought from the songs of the slaves to the music of West emphatically illustrates how African Americans have found within the matrix of religion a powerful source of resistance and ontological and personal worth amidst the contextual, oppressive realities of a given era. The trajectory of the suffering (black) Jesus of the slaves to the sacrilegious Yeezus of Kanye West reveals the evolution of the divided black religious identity throughout history and the attempts of African Americans to find a "new religious ideal" within the contested, subversive figure of Christ (*Souls* 129).

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### **Vita**

Kevin Wood Pyon was born in Rock Hill, South Carolina to Eun and Mi Pyon. He graduated from both Piedmont International University and High Point University in 2010, receiving a B.S. in Secondary English Education from the former and a B.A. in English from the latter. After teaching English at the high school and community college level for two years following graduation, he enrolled in Appalachian State University in the fall of 2013 to pursue a Masters of Arts degree in English, completing the program in the spring of 2015. Currently, he is pursuing a PhD in English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.