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The Future of the African American Past

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Sites and Sources for the Study of the African American Religious Past

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I want to begin by situating my work and my remarks today in dual commitment to the theories, methods, and scholarly traditions of History and Religious Studies. Central to what Religious Studies offers the study of the African American religious past is tools to understand the category of “religion” as the product of historical processes. From this perspective, religion as a category is produced and contested in the material world rather than reflecting or referring to an obvious realm of “the sacred” (in which the God of the Bible resides). As historians with interest in exploring the contours of the African American religious past, our task is to reveal and interpret that past in all its variety, complexity, and messiness. This means, among other things, not assuming that certain religious configurations and commitments – Protestant Christianity in particular – are the most appropriate subjects of our inquiry because they represent the majority and not positioning them as normative and correct. That is to say, as historians we should be focused not on what religion *should* look like and should be doing in and for African American communities, but on what *has* it looked like and what the outcomes of various formulations of religion in African American life have been.

Decentering Protestantism allows us to avoid privileging particular political modes and the religious institutions and leaders that have been the vehicles for those political concerns – black churches and male clergy – as the primary focus for the study of African American religious history. Needless to say, we miss the full complexity of this history if we attend only to a dominant tradition using the conventional sources that emerge from its theological and institutional contexts. In framing my remarks in this way, I certainly do not mean to argue that this dominant tradition of Protestantism as located primarily in black church denominations is not worthy of scholarly attention and I do not mean to critique the extraordinarily rich and significant historical scholarship about African American Protestantism and political activism. Indeed, these are topics that have concerned me in the course of my own research.

In considering the futures of the African American religious past, however, I believe it is vital that we expand our scope of inquiry. This work involves, in part, acknowledging the fact of religious diversity among people of African descent in the U.S. and devoting more attention to Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Baha'is, practitioners of Vodou and Santeria, Humanists, and secularists, for example. Accounting for religious diversity and studying the religious lives of African Americans wherever and however they have chosen to situate these is central to the task of the historian. But even beyond charting that more diverse set of traditions and actors, I'm interested in what new understandings of and perspectives on African American religious history emerge when we bring sites and sources in addition to churches, congregants, and clergy into view. What do we learn about the range of religious experiences and expression in African American life when we enter a different set of locations that shape African American religious possibility?

I want to look briefly at three sources I have encountered in my own research on early twentieth-century African American religious history that have led me to broaden my view of the sites and social actors of that history.

1. Poster for Spencer Williams' *The Blood of Jesus* (1941)

In 1941 veteran actor and director Spencer Williams released *The Blood of Jesus*, the first in a set of three religious movies he would make in conjunction with white Dallas-based film producer Alfred Sack. These films were part of the broader landscape of “race films” produced for black audiences, often by black companies, and that by this period had begun to decline in production and popularity. Williams had specialized in comedic acting and had appeared in a number of popular black singing cowboy films like the 1939 *The Bronze Buckaroo*, starring Herb Jeffries. With *The Blood of Jesus*, he struck out in a new direction in seeking to deliver a message of Christian redemption to African Americans in an entertaining package. While not unique in mobilizing this combination of entertainment and evangelism on screen (Eloyce and James Gist’s ca. 1932 silent film, *The Hell-Bound Train*, takes a similar approach), Williams was, by all accounts, uniquely successful in appealing to viewers who saw his films in movie theaters, churches, and school and community auditoriums. *The Blood of Jesus* is about gender, sexuality, family, urbanization, small town church life, and popular culture, and Williams places the character of Martha, played by Catherine Caviness, at the center of the film’s story. Although set firmly in a Christian context – the story begins with Martha’s Baptism in a river and many scenes show the signs of Williams’ interest in Catholicism – the narrative and visual focus on Martha’s trials and redemption highlight women as central figures in black religious life and presents a complex portrait of theology and religious community with only passing reference to church and clergy.

Analyzing the film itself, the material culture of advertising posters and lobby cards, the careers of the director and actors, and the contexts in which Williams’ film was exhibited made clear to me that it is necessary to engage the movie theater as a site for the study of African American religious history and to locate film production and reception history as part of the stuff of African American religious life. Cara Caddoo’s wonderful recent book, *Envisioning Freedom: Cinema and the Building of Modern Black Life*, demonstrates that we cannot understand the early history of African American engagement with film

without taking seriously the role that black clergy and church communities played in fostering the cinema as a cultural arena that could cultivate collective race sensibility and serve as a springboard for political action. At the same time, debates over onscreen representations sometimes fractured community and revealed conflicting visions of communal goals. My sources called on me to think not only about the cinema (whether located in a church, community center, or a movie theater) as a political environment, but also as a religious one that viewers of Williams' films and other film engaged as such. Other sources, such as a December 1929 article in the *Baltimore Afro-American* recounting injuries sustained by two women who "got happy" at a screening of a life of Christ film, underscore how arenas of popular culture can cultivate religious experience. Bringing the study of media and popular culture more fully into African American religious history opens up new ways of thinking about the production and dissemination of ideas about religion and the mediation of religious experience. Works like Caddoo's, Lerone Martin's on what he calls "phonograph religion" of the 1920s, Marla Frederick on the global broadcasts of black televangelists, Kathryn Lofton's study of Oprah, and recent and forthcoming studies of Tyler Perry's work all attend to media production and consumption as sources that challenge conventional ways of thinking about the sites of African American religious history.

2. Rabbi Wentworth Arthur Matthew's World War II Draft Registration Card (1942)

In the course of researching a recent project on the black new religious movements of the Great Migration, I turned to an online database of vital records from the National Archives to learn more about Wentworth Arthur Matthew, an immigrant from St. Kitts and rabbi of Harlem's Commandment Keepers' Ethiopian Hebrew Congregation. Because personal narratives of racial and religious origins were central to how black Hebrew leaders in Harlem promoted their theological claims, I was interested in Matthew's assertion at various points that he had been born in Lagos, Nigeria. The result of my search showed that, in the official record, Matthew most often gave his birthplace as St. Kitts, but one source – his World War II

draft registration card – raised a host of other questions for me about individual and collective understandings of the relationship between religious and racial identity for blacks in early twentieth-century America. We see on Matthew’s card that he considered his clerical title of Rabbi to be so important that he added it above his name – squeezed it in – where no title was required, nor one requested and also included it in his signature. On the other side of the registration card Matthew asked for an amendment to the government-supplied list of racial designators, requesting that Hebrew be added so that his linked religious and racial identity would be appropriately represented. Matthew’s request led me to wonder whether he was alone in this.

The records of the so-called “Old Man’s Draft” registration of April 26-27, 1942 turned out to provide access to hundreds of cases of members of what I have come to call religio-racial movements who, like Matthew, challenged the power of the state to define them solely according to race (and, from their perspective, the wrong race) and insisted on a being represented according to what they understood to be an inseparable religio-racial identity. Within the archive I found members of Father Divine’s Peace Mission movement, such as Perfect Endurance, a migrant to the city from August Georgia who lived in a Peace Mission residence and, in keeping with Father Divine’s theology that race is a negative construct of the mind, asked that he be listed simply as a human. The registrar complied, but wrote his requested designation above the supplied category of Negro. Alec Brown Bey, who migrated to Philadelphia from Manning, South Carolina, insisted that he be represented on the form as a Moorish American, the religio-racial designation that members of the Moorish Science Temple used. Moreover, he persuaded the registrar to characterize his complexion, hair color, and eye color as “olive,” a theological term for Moorish Americans that spoke of their connection to the divine. We also see that the registrar pushed back, noting his belief that Brown Bey was actually “a Negro.” None of these postures are unique in the draft registration records. Working with these unexpected sources has allowed me to move beyond what scholars have

offered thus far in focusing on leaders and official theologies to explore how members of the movements embraced, cultivated, and communicated their religio-racial identities.

In the course of my research I came to see such bureaucratic paperwork – vital records such as marriage and death certificates and government documents like census sheets, draft registration cards, and immigration paperwork – as rich and complex records of aspects of life within the religio-racial movements. Reading with, through, and against such documents to find evidence of mundane and extraordinary experiences of religio-racial identity illuminates the race-making and maintenance work that members of these groups undertook in daily life and public contexts. Reading them in this way requires us to look at the social contexts in which this work took place and to consider sites like the draft board, the county clerk’s office, the immigration judge’s courtroom, the military base as sites of religious expression and experience. Situating the archive of the bureaucracy as offering central sources for my study highlights the power of the state to shape and constrain both religious experience and racial identity. In individual transactions and in collective encounter with government agencies, members of religio-racial movements challenged the state’s power to categorize them and define black identity. Sylvester Johnson’s recent *African American Religions, 1500-2000: Colonialism, Democracy, and Freedom* offers a compelling frame for understanding colonialism and empire as constitutive of the contexts in which black religious life took shape. Matthew’s experience before the draft card calls for us to not only recognize the constraints that such disciplinary structures place on African American religions, but also to attend to the texture of religious experience and expression that his challenge to the draft registrar reveals.

3. Mary F. Wood, Commitment Register of the Stockton State Hospital (1913)

In 1913 law enforcement and medical officials decided that Mary F. Wood, a 48-year-old Missouri native living in north-central California, should be committed to the Stockton State Hospital. The commitment paperwork indicates that Wood, a Methodist, had “Walked the streets crying ‘Glory be to

God, singing, reading scripture, preaching &c.; will not sleep night or day; wanted to be appointed as preacher of the local church.” The diagnosis was of insanity accompanied by fixed religious delusions, and the intake psychiatrist listed religion as a predisposing factor. Street preaching, evangelizing, and the desire to preach at a local church are not on their own clear indications of mental illness, although gendered and racialized understandings of religious leadership may have played a role in the deputy sheriff’s sense that Wood was disruptive. In Wood’s case, these religious expressions were situated in the context of a manic state that produced sleeplessness and exhaustion leading to her death eight days after admission to the hospital.

On its own, this document is not particularly revealing of aspects of the African American religious past beyond those of an individual’s religious expression, but placed in a larger context of psychiatric discourses and practices about race and religion, it directs us to a set of sources and new sites for inquiry. Wood was among many early twentieth-century African Americans who were remanded by courts or committed by family members to psychiatric institutions and diagnosed with some form of religiously grounded mental illness. Scholars of the history of racialization of mental illness in a variety of contexts in Africa and the African diaspora (Lynette Jackson on colonial Zimbabwe and Jonathan Metzl on the U.S., for example) have emphasized the use of diagnosis, institutionalization, and treatment as a mode of racial containment, particularly of individual and group acts of resistance. Few scholars have attended to the way that discourses about black religion shaped the diagnostic categories psychiatrists created, the processes of diagnosis, and practices of treatment. Early twentieth-century psychiatric literature about African Americans is filled with assertions about enduring “Negro savagery,” manifest in religion and culture, that many psychiatrists understood to be grounded in an African background that continued to shape African American “traits of character, habit, and behavior.” Written in a period in which many claimed that the general incidence of mental illness had increased dramatically and, for African Americans, was the consequence of freedom and mobility, these studies promoted the idea that African Americans’ propensity

for emotional religion, embodied religious excess, and superstitious belief placed them at greater risk for developing certain mental illnesses.

While such racist discourses about African American religion were commonplace in white American political, educational, religious, and popular culture, the page of the Stockton State Hospital's commitment register that marks Mary Wood's admission just days before her death have led me to seek out sources that might reveal more about the intersection of African American religious history and the history of disability in the form of mental illness. Those sources include psychiatric literature that frames the intersection of religion and mental illness in racialized ways. But wondering about Mary Wood's life, her religious commitments and aspirations, and her experience in the Stockton State Hospital also require that I turn to the hospital and mental institution as a site for the study of the African American religious past. How might Wood's diagnosis as suffering from religious insanity have guided the treatment she received from the doctors, and did ideas about race and religion play a role in her commitment, treatment, and eventual death?

In putting these three documents from my research before you, I hope to highlight the rich possibilities of engaging sources and sites beyond the scope of the conventional ones through which we have traditionally told the story of African American religious history. As is clear, these sources and sites sometimes emerge from or have deep connections to those traditional arenas of religious life, but they raise new sets of questions that call for our attention as we chart the future of the African American religious past.