

“The Art and Politics of African American Faith”

Josef Sorett

February 1, 2017

Marie Griffith:

Welcome to this afternoon’s lecture by Professor Josef Sorett of Columbia University. We are thrilled to have him here today. I’ll just make a plug for his recently published book that’s getting all kinds of wonderful attention: *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics*. We’ll hear more about that, of course, here in a moment.

I just want to mention to all of you that the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics has several other events this semester. There are flyers outside in Umrath Lounge, and our next event is February 9th, which is a lecture by Cynthia Burack of the Ohio State University on the Christian Right and SOGI (Sexual Orientation Gender Identity) rights. On March 6th, we are very pleased to be partnering with the Eden Theological Seminary for the screening of a new film, “An American Conscience: The Reinhold Niebuhr Story.” The film will be screened here on a Monday evening over in Emerson Auditorium in Knight Hall, and there will be a panel discussion following that. Finally, on April 4th, we are delighted to be welcoming Michael Curry, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, to give a public lecture here on campus called “Healing a House Divided.” So, we look forward to that.

I’m very pleased to have my colleague at the Center of Religion and Politics, Professor Lerone Martin, who will introduce our guest speaker for today.

Lerone Martin:

Thank you, Marie. So, I have the distinct honor and privilege of introducing to some and presenting to others Dr. Josef Sorett. Dr. Sorett is an Associate Professor of Religion in African American Studies at Columbia University, and we are very excited to host Josef here today because his research and his public engagement take up some of our nation’s most enduring big questions and issues, issues that are continually seeming to be at the fore of the American experience. [This includes] questions such as, “what is the secular, what is the sacred,” and, “how do these two have anything to do with one another?” [Questions such as,] “how do we arrive at these notions,” and, “how do our ideals and practices of the sacred entangle with our worship, our worldviews, and, increasingly, our politics (for those of you who may happen to read the newspaper once in a while) and our understandings of race, sexuality, and propriety?” And, finally, “what are the structures and forms of the boundaries for these entanglements and debates?”

To answer these questions, Dr. Josef Sorett's research draws our attention to the arts and various forms of cultural production. With a PhD in African American Studies from Harvard, and a Master's in Divinity degree from Boston University, his research employs keen analysis to yield multifaceted insights at the intersections of the sacred and art. His first book, which Marie already mentioned, *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics*, was published by Oxford University Press in 2016. This book illuminates how ideas of the sacred have figured into debates about blackness, faith, art, culture, modernity, and politics across the 20th century.

Currently, Josef is at work with two books that continue to explore these themes: one tentatively titled, *The Holy Holy Black: The Ironies of an African American Secular*, which is also currently under contract with Oxford University Press, and a third book which examines the recording, consumption, marketing, and politics of gospel music. His research has been recognized and supported with grants from leading foundations and academic centers, including the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, the Eli Lilly Endowment, as well as [...] the W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African American Research, the Louisville Institute for the Study of American Religion, the Fund for Theological Education, and, most recently, Yale University's Institute for Sacred Music, where he is currently a Senior Fellow. Josef has consistently brought such rigorous scholarship to bear in his public engagement as well, something we here at the Center greatly appreciate and admire about Josef. His public engagement has taken up some of the most pressing questions facing our democratic-republic, including [those of] gender and sexual equality and questions of mass incarceration and rehabilitation.

He is the founding director of Columbia University's Center on African American Religion, Sexual Politics, and Social Justice, also known as "CARSS." Dr. Sorett established CARSS in the immediate wake of California's Prop. 8, when he served as a research assistant for a project that interviewed roughly 100 clergy and laypeople in African American faith communities across the country. With the generous support from the Arcus, Carpenter, and Ford Foundations, CARSS was formed, and through Josef's leadership, the center has convened a group of scholars, activists, and religious leaders, all aimed at advancing academic and public conversations concerning religion and sexual politics. In addition, Dr. Sorett has lead a collaborative research project with New York Theological Seminary, investigating their Master's of Professional Studies Program, which is housed at the Sing Sing State Prison, to examine the relationship between prison education and recidivism.

To no surprise, because of his stellar record, his writing and commentary are much sought after, appearing in a range of popular media outlets, including *ABC News*, the *Huffington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, as well as the *BBC* and *NPR*. And now, we

are delighted to add the Danforth Center on Religion and Politics to that list. So, please [...] join me in welcoming Dr. Josef Sorett.

Josef Sorett:

Good afternoon. [...] I want to thank Marie Griffith for the welcome, and Lerone Martin for that incredible introduction. I'll do my best to try to live up to what he has just presented on paper. I want to thank, as well, the entire Danforth faculty and staff for the welcome and invitation to give this talk. I thank all of you for coming out to what I hope will turn into a conversation. I've tried to organize my presentation as such. It's a privilege to share with you, in fact, what is a talk that is not so much guided by one single, strong, overarching argument inasmuch as it is organized around a couple of episodes that bring together two of the projects that Lerone mentioned in his introduction: drawing together reflections on African American literature and—we'll see whether we'll consider it gospel music—Christian music in recent memory, which is debated. It is a site of contestation as to whether or not it is an extension of the tradition of modern gospel music. So, I want to bring together literature and music to invite a larger conversation on the theme "the Art and Politics of African American Faith." Lerone has also foregrounded the sort of pressing social issues of our day. I'm not so sure as to the degree to which this project or this presentation will illumine or invite hope and faith as it relates to those pressing issues, but I would invite you to help me make those connections as we draw on these stories and examples to think about their import for our present moment.

What I'd like to do is a sort of point of departure in thinking about the study of African American religion. My work is in many ways informed by scholars of African American literature [...] and scholars of African American religion [on one hand], and the desire to tell through these projects a story that brings together sacred and secular, that narrates the religious in the literature as a singular story, to complicate the ways in which religion and literature have been told as separate but also to push back against a particular narrative, or to problematize, as many scholars have done in recent years, a particular narrative of African American religion as always political, as always in opposition to the State, or to whiteness, or to white Christianity. To do that, I want to invite us to think about narrating American religious history through an engagement with African American art and literature, and to begin I want to borrow an offering in which the way the Black church is figured as a place of political oppositionality in light of the weight or the long shadow that the 1960s casts on the present moment. I want to point to a figure as a way of starting, and in fact, I'll attempt to use multimedia as a resource [to structure my argument] as to where I want to go: first, to frame religion, literature, and music in a way that brings sacred and secular together. I want to give you two cases of what I refer to as "racial catholicity," which is drawing on *Spirit in the Dark*, and the turn to something called "urban praise" at the end of the millennium as a way of bringing literature and music together.

But to get there, I want to invoke someone who I frame in the final chapter of my book as a contrary spirit in the middle of the 1960s, Albert Murray. We might think of him as a

literary figure inspiring us today in a conversation to think about African American religion in new terms. Murray, in pushing back against the orthodoxies of “Black Power,” art, and politics, in his 1970 book, amongst other things, *The Omni-Americans*—I want to lay out two quotes [of his] that I’ll attempt to think through. One, as it relates to “Black” and “white,” Murray writes:

“American culture, even in its most rigidly segregated precincts, is patently and irrevocably composite. It is, regardless of all the hysterical protestations of those who would have it otherwise, incontestably mulatto. Indeed, for all their traditional antagonisms and obvious differences, the so-called black and so-called white people of the United States resemble nobody else in the world so much as they resemble each other.”

Murray is pushing back against the Black Nationalist strand of Black literature that sought to secede in many terms, at least as Addison Gayle outlined in *The Black Aesthetic*, from white and Western culture. And as it relates to religion, [...] he’s pushing back against also a host of tropes about Black religion as either hyper-political or as pathological, as too oriented by otherworldly concerns that it was no political good or always already political, to offer a subtle analysis of what he referred to as the “affirmative powers of Black faith.”

Here, I would also invoke an excerpt from *The Omni-Americans*, where he is drawing on T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* to complicate the ways in which Black oppression and white privilege are described. He [...] tells a story (referring to himself in the third person) of his great-great-grandfather. He writes:

“But he is not cheered by the fix they’re in; he is sobered by it—as his great-great-grandfather was sobered by the spirituals that sometimes whispered *nobody knows the trouble I seen when I seen what was really happening in the BIG HOUSE*. No wonder Great-Great-Grandpa took religious salvation so seriously.”

Here, we think of the spiritual as emerging from the fields, of the Black experience of oppression, but now, Murray flips that script by turning it into a close proximity to what happens within the Big House, which is to say he makes the case for white folks singing the blues—not to draw *sympathy* to that white experience, but to recognize there are certain things that are not mediated simply by this racial divide such that religious salvation that orients oneself outside those circumstances is sometimes necessary. The limits of human liberation often demand of us an effort to transcend on terms that don’t always meet themselves out socially.

And so, I want to bring together Murray’s complicating of “black” and “white,” to bring together culture and politics, to bring together this-worldly and other-worldly to play with tensions between belief and practice in the study of African American religion. And to do so I want to lift up two examples, as illustrative of two moments, one from literature the other

from music, that I take to be indicative of the kind of exchange between “black” and “white,” and the affirmative powers of faith that both frustrate and force us forward beyond the kind of dichotomies that Albert Murray challenged in 1970. To do that, there may not be much that is self-evidently in common between these two examples other than the fact that they are presumably secular artists offering us new source materials for the study of religion that challenge us to think differently about that familiar adage that all Black artists, and especially Black musicians, come out of the church. How does religion follow them when they presumably transcend this line that is cast as both from sacred to secular but is also often cast a Black to “white,” from ministry to the market. How might we think about the way in which religion follows them through these spaces?

So for the first example, I want to turn to the 1940s. Something that I refer to as racial Catholicity is an effort to bring together on one hand an increasing Catholic impulse in Black literature and culture at the time, and by Catholic in this sense I mean as appeal to the universal. As the 1940s, in a moment of post-war optimism with the early gains of the Civil Rights Movement, with military service, and the push for civil rights growing, there was an increased emphasis, as seen in such anthologies as *The Negro Caravan* and elsewhere, as art historian Richard Powell sums up the moment, when Black artists were becoming as “conspicuous, cosmopolitan, and candid about their universality and growing political importance in world affairs.” And I want to note the connection between this Catholic impulse in Black letters and culture with a moment that also saw the beginnings of a dramatic rise in a traditional Black Catholicism. That is to say, beginning in the 1940s and the three decades after, we see the growth in the number of Black Catholics rise from roughly 300,000 to close to 1 million. So we can think of the 1940s as an especially Catholic moment in African American culture and literary history. That is to say the development of a robust claim about Catholicity of Black literature and culture, and the lived experience that those forms attempted to represent coincided with a historical moment in which Black people began to join the Catholic church in greater numbers than ever before. In the convergence of a Catholic sentiment with an expansion of Black participation in the formal traditions of American Catholicism, the beginnings of the forties can be understood as the dawn of a uniquely Catholic and Catholicizing moment in Black culture.

The contours of this Afro-Catholic moment also extended beyond the borders of the US as Catholicism enabled key points of exchange between Black artists and intellectuals in the US and those within the colonizing Francophone African and the Caribbean nations. For example, negritude writers such as Aime Cesaire and Leopold Senghor emerged out of contexts in which, unlike the US, Catholicism had been the religious rule rather than the exception.

However, these international and domestic phenomena were not mutually exclusive. Both patterns signaled a Black internationalist sensibility that became only more pronounced in the wake of World War II. Here we can think about weaving together narratives of the great migration and urbanization with the growth of a Black Catholic diaspora and the emergence of a Judeo-Christian sensibility here in the US, all aided by military service, civil rights activism, and a growing human rights discourse that took institutional form across the 1940s. Now, to be clear, lest the claim of racial Catholicity, what we might think of as a confluence or convergence or coalescence among the increasing number of Black Catholics and the rise of this Catholic sensibility in the literature, lest we read this too literally, Catholicism was but one tradition through which African American writers made a new claim on the universal. There was, to be sure, Claude McKay's conversion to Catholicism, and McKay perhaps best represents the convergence of Catholicity and Afro-Catholicism that I am observing. But there was also Robert Hayden's embrace of the Baha'i faith and Howard Thurman's turn to an interfaith ecuminism. Both Hayden and Thurman sought to inhabit a kind of pluralist, post-Protestant religious world that was indicative of this Catholicity. Both men are also fitting examples of the kind of Black religious experience that did not adhere to the normative logic of a simply Protestant Black church.

But rather than simply narrating universalism's triumph, a number of Black writers at this time displayed a marked concern with digging more deeply into the specific details of Black life, including, if not especially, Black religious traditions in service to their assertions of Catholicity. They also aired on the side of valuing craft and cultivating the specific forms most capably of achieving such universality. Here the particulars of religion figured as a key to arguing that racial aesthetics, and thus Black people, were by definition American and human. Here, African American religion as imagined was claimed as the very stuff of American culture.

To give you a couple of examples from this first moment of this Catholicity I'm gesturing towards, I want to spend a little time with two specific Black writers. Ann Petry and Robert Hayden, who you have before you. During the 1940s, Ann Petry was equally busy in the world of literature and politics. She took a position as a reporter at Adam Clayton Powell's publication *People's Voice*, which was a gathering space for prominent Black radicals at the time. She studied at Columbia under Mabel Louise Robinson and took classes at the WPA supported Harlem Community Center, which claimed the likes of visual artists Romare Bearden and Aaron Douglas, amongst others. With a fellowship from Houghton Mifflin, Petry became a full-time writer in 1943 and her first book was published in 1946. Written and set in Harlem, *The Street* became a commercial success. It eventually sold over 1 million copies, a first for a Black woman, and achieved for Petry a certain measure of literary fame. On aesthetic terms, Petry was part of a cohort of Black social realist artists that included the likes of painter John Biggers and Elizabeth Catlett, poets like Sterling

Brown and Langston Hughes, and most prominently, of course, Richard Wright, whose bestselling *Native Son* was published just a few years earlier.

Throughout her work, Petry was attentive to matters of race and gender as part of her broader leftist political critique. Like Wright, as Farah Jasmine Griffin has noted, Petry “saw fiction as the form that could best serve to educate and reform society.” Petry’s commitments in this regard were made clear in her essay, *The Novel: A Social Criticism*, which was published in the 1950 Anthology *The Writer’s Book*, edited by Helen R. Hull, another professor of creative writing at Columbia. The book’s table of contents read (*sic*) like a “who’s who” in post-war letters, including W.H. Auden, Pearl Buck, Thomas Mann, Leonora Speyer, and Lionel Trilling. As the tagline on its cover stated, *The Writer’s Book* was intended to provide “practical advice by the top experts in every field of reading.” Petry’s article was the only contribution by a Black writer. More personal than practical in tone, her essay was both a general defense of the aesthetics of social realism and a specific response to criticism that her book, *The Street*, had received in several leftist publications. Significantly, Petry’s essay appeared at precisely the moment that a leftist aesthetic was in the midst of being overshadowed by the rise of the Black modernist novel. Yet her argument hinged less on the idea of either a distinctive racial aesthetic or leftist literary agenda, than it did on an appeal to the significance of religious, and that is to say Judeo-Christian and biblical sources, for all American writers.

To be clear, Petry was neither an advocate for Black churches nor a Christian apologist. Following the overwhelming popularity of *The Street*, in an interview in *The Chicago Defender*, Petry shared, “I don’t think that church groups even touch the surface of the questions she shared. If Christianity were a living thing it would be alright, but it does not live,” Petry explained. “The bulk of the population gives only lip service to the thoughts of Christianity.” Petry’s assessment of American Christians in *The Defender* did, however, suggest that she held onto something like what one might think of as Judeo-Christian ideals even if she made no claims to be a believer.

In *The Novel: A Social Criticism*, Ann Petry had more to say concerning what she referred to as “the thoughts of Christianity” and their implications for the literary canon. Calling attention to inconsistencies between principles and practices of those who espouse Christianity was an age old tradition in American letters. But here she did more than craft a Christian critique of racism, she theorized the indebtedness of literature to Christianity’s sacred texts. According to Petry, the basic theme of American literature was “essentially the same—and the Lord said unto Cain, ‘where is Abel my brother?’ And he said ‘I know not, am I my brother’s keeper?’” It was this passage that provided the core idea that in the work of the socially conscious novelist, Petry maintained, modern literary conventions drew false dichotomies between art and politics, while delineating an abundance of distinctive

aesthetics—naturalism, realism, modernism, experimentalism. In her estimation, this elaborate professional pattern was in truth, “confused patter.” In words that closely resembled the speech that DuBois delivered in an NAACP convention in 1926, Petry confessed, “it seems to me that all truly great art is propaganda. The novel, like all other forms of great art, will always reflect the political, economic, and social structure of the period in which it was created.”

By 1950, The United States had entered the Cold War and Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anti-communist campaign was well underway. Under this heightened scrutiny, leftist literary circles had taken a serious hit by the time Petry’s essay appeared. In her estimation, a preoccupation with the “perfidious influence of Karl Marx had left a wide range of political novels to be lumped together even as they fell out of fashion.” Indeed, the ghost of Marx haunted the aspirations and expectations of the current literary scene, as she diagnosed it. However, rather than Marxist dogma, Petry argued that, “a fictional emphasis on social problems would be more accurately attributed to the Old Testament idea that man is his brother’s keeper.” By attempting to shift attention from Communism and Marx to the story of Cain and Abel, Petry situated African American literature between Marxist ideology on one hand and Christian theology on the other. She astutely noted a connection between the literary trends of her day and the reasonable fear that McCarthyism fomented among American writers. Yet, in her assessment, American critics overestimated the influence of Marx at the expense of missing the significance of the Bible.

Even if not entirely reducible to red-scare politics, social realism had fallen out of fashion and Richard Wright had departed for France just four years earlier. Within in a climate of Communist witch hunts, perhaps Petry thought that shifting attention from Marx to the socially acceptable influence of Christian scripture might allow for a more generous assessment of the sociological novel. Petry went on to assert that the craftsmanship apparent in these books was of a high order. As with all novels, literary success depended on an author’s ability to delicately balance thematic concerns with other qualities, like character development and dialogue. Form and content were equally important for even to have literary power it had to be made apparent as “both a social system and a thing of the spirit,” as Ann Petry referred to it. Novels had to reveal the human struggle within and without. Novels that addressed the topic of relationships were no different. They no more required a specific literary category than, as the experimentalists insisted, than Black people required a special pleading. “The Negro problem was the very stuff of fiction. Sometimes comic, more often tragic, always ironic, endlessly dramatic,” Petry wrote. All literature had a politics, she explained. From social realism to sentimental fiction, all books ran the risk of failure on artistic terms and no less than other genres, social criticism elicited emotional responses from readers. She concluded they also encouraged social reforms. Novels disturbed readers, and, doing so, called society to account. In this way

literature was often the original impetus in her estimation for social change. Ultimately, Petry's essay affirmed the novel's value as a mode of social criticism, privileging a literary vision in which art and politics were necessarily enmeshed, just as this model of writing was becoming unpopular. Yet she did this at a time when Black writers were instead increasingly moving to reimagine, if not wholly induce, such entanglements of art and politics.

I want to move to my second example of this Catholicity. Another great example of the kind of Catholic aspirations that animated Black literary ambitions in this moment can be seen in the work of the poet Robert Hayden. This was especially evident in the introduction to the counterpoint series, which he co-edited with Myron O'Higgins in 1948. This is what you see in front of you. Hayden was ardently opposed to their writing being received "as the custom is, entirely in the light of sociology and politics." Describing the introduction as a manifesto, one critic anticipated that it would become regarded as the entering wedge in the emancipation of Negro poetry in America. If the series failed to achieve this lofty goal, it certainly marked a transition in the poet's aesthetic vision and career trajectory. Hayden had developed significantly as a poet while working for Detroit's WPA Federal Writer's Project in the thirties. He then honed his craft further at the University of Michigan in the forties, where he pursued his masters degree under the tutelage of W.H. Auden. Also in the 1940s, along with his wife Urma, Hayden joined the American Baha'i community. Much later he would confess to struggling with his faith, but during the mid-forties the Baha'i emphasis on religious and racial unity paired well with Auden's push for Hayden to move beyond the particulars of racial themes.

Indeed, Hayden's poetry led literary and religious modernisms to great effect. Before the end of his distinguished career, Hayden would be appointed as both the first poet-laureate of Senegal and the first Black poet-laureate of the United States, then considered the consultant to the Library of Congress. Yet when the first *Counterpoise* leaflet was released, Hayden had just finished studying at Michigan and was settling into a faculty position at Fisk University. Despite fellowships from the Rosenwald and Ford Foundations during these early years, it was not until the 1960s that Hayden gained a wider hearing. His first publication with the commercial press did not come till 1966, by which point a new generation of artists, those Black arts movement poets, were deeming him passe because he refused to identify as a Black poet.

During the 1940s, however, Hayden's simultaneous emphasis on the particularities of Black life and the human universal made perfect sense. While the *Counterpoise* manifesto made no direct mention of race, it clearly addressed several audiences at once, eschewing orthodoxies on both sides of the color line. In ways that anticipated Hayden's confrontation with the Black arts poets of the sixties, the *Counterpoise* manifesto rejected any particular

status or category for writers who were so-called minorities. In language similar to that employed by the journalist and race man Roi Ottley, Hayden was “opposed to the chauvinistic, the cultish, to special pleading.” While the richness of the African American experience offered unique resources, they would not allow race politics to “limit and restrict creative expression.” Neither would they provide the sort of racial propaganda often called for by race leaders. Irrespective of artistic medium, and they refer to writing and music and the graphic arts, an openness to the “experimental and the conventional was paramount.” Hayden contended that uncritical celebrations of underdeveloped art by a liberal largely white art world were equally undesirable. Neither a “conscious to solve nor a political axe to grind were due cause for anybody to be overpraised,” in Hayden’s words. He was not suggesting that mainstream presses were indiscriminately underwriting Black mediocrity, after he would not himself receive a contract from a commercial publishing house for another two decades. To the point, those who presided over publication opportunities—editors, reviewers, anthologists—were not to be granted the power of life and death over an artist’s vision. Black leaders and the literary establishment would both serve notice. The poet would not be bought either by affirmation or exclusion.

Over the course of his life, Hayden witnessed an evolution of literary acts in which the new Negro transformed to the Black arts, although he refused to be ascribed the name by either movement. Rather than an elision of race politics, Hayden’s refusal of the modifiers “Negro” and “Black” was borne at least in part out of religious commitment. He later explained, “I believe in the essential oneness of all people, and I believe in the basic unity of all religions. I don’t believe that races are important. These are all Baha’i points of view and my work grows out of this vision. Indeed the Baha’i faith encouraged in its adherents an abandonment of archaic systems and attitudes, the attendant loss of identity, acquisition of insecurity and trepidation, for believers relinquishing racial identification was part of a process of achieving spiritual maturity.

In this view, the *Counterpoise* series announcement can be read as both an artist credo and a declaration of faith. Structured something of a hybrid of poetry and prose, the work appeared absent of any definitive beginnings or endings. Its lack of any periods or capitalized letters revealed a modernist emphasis on experimentation and form. The piece perhaps most resembled a religious litany. It reads as a call to action to be recited by a congregation. Indeed the word “believe” appears three times, once early to affirm experimentation, and then again in each of the manifesto’s last two lines. Here Hayden’s religious ambitions were subtly unveiled. His insistence that “poetry has humanistic and spiritual values not to be ignored without impunity,” certainly grew out of his time with Auden, who by the time Hayden arrived at Michigan had begun to think about poetry as a religious vocation. Still in contrast to Auden’s aestheticized Protestant spirituality, Hayden invoked the most fundamental Baha’i principle, announcing a vision that was

simultaneously religious and literary, he professed, “we believe in the oneness of mankind and the importance of the arts in the struggle for peace and unity.”

The quintessentially modern religion’s first principle—the oneness of mankind—found a hearing in Black communities in the preceding decades. As Abdul Baha had addressed audiences at the NAACP, Howard University, and Bethel Literary Society at the Historic Metropolitan AME Church in D.C., to name just a few sites. The Baha’i message of racial equality and religious unity, Baptist, AME, or otherwise, rang true with many Black audiences. In the forties, and on the heels of World War II, such ideas sounded anew on both religious and political registers. Various statements endorsing the oneness of mankind had taken on new institutional life with the formation of the UN in 1945. Indeed as historian Samuel Moyn has shown, one secularizing trajectory that Christian theology travelled across the 20th century was into a human rights discourse. And Hayden’s manifesto appeared the same year that the general assembly of the UN adopted the universal declaration of human rights. Hayden’s longheld position on the outskirts of the African American canon was a byproduct, at least in part, of his aesthetic. Being so deeply Baha’i, although his poetry drew heavily on the Bible, his version of Afro-modernism was post-Protestant, involving neither a disavowal nor a declaration of Christian faith. It was ultra-modern, to the point, almost, of misrecognition.

So, I want to shift dramatically from this example in the 1940s with the cases of Ann Petry and Robert Hayden and turn from literature to the music, moving from the forties to the dawn of the new millennium. So I’m going to play you a clip to frame that story that I want to tell, and invite you to think with me for this new project about the relationship between “Black” and “white” and Christian music in recent memory. And it’s supposed to be sideways [*referring to image on screen*].

[*Music video plays*]

I’m going to pause there. So for those of you who don’t know, this is Chance the Rapper singing “How Great is Our God,” backed by a choir in which his cousin is the lead singer. And the question I want to ask, if we could think about the ways in which Ann Petry’s inclusion in the *Writer’s Book* or Robert Hayden’s mentorship and collaborations with Auden in [...] part of the modernist, experimentalist aesthetic: how do we think here in this new moment about the relationship between “Black” and “white” in the formation of something that comes to be known as urban praise? And the question I want to ask is how we get *here*, to a top—arguably the hottest—hip hop act of last year, covering what is evangelical praise and worship music. Right, so he is in fact sampling this, or remaking.

[*Music video plays*]

So I just, I let it play for a second. And so Chance is interesting for any number of reasons. We might ask how Chris Tomlinson, singing here, right, [a] Colorado-based worship leader [and a] highly coveted, sought-after worship leader at the center of these huge conferences or worship experiences—how this standard of...I guess we could think of it as “contemporary evangelical” worship music—becomes a source for sampling in contemporary hip hop. [...] Chance was playing sideways in part because, in addition to the content of the lyrics, he released this song via Twitter, and it’s meant to be watched on your iPhone, where you can simply turn it. It doesn’t quite convert to presentation form. Which is great, right, to think about the relationship between content and form, the music and medium. And so part of what I want to try to do is offer a preliminary story about how we get from there to here through the emergence of something called “praise and worship,” in fact, which has a lot of history right here in St. Louis. And that is with the formation of Integrity Communications in the 1960s and 70s.

What you have here is a charismatic renewal magazine, which begins to be published in the 1960s and 70s, with the idea of staging live worship experiences that are on one hand meant to teach prayer, authentic prayer and worship, right? And I think this is Bob Mumford alongside Bishop Joseph Garlington, who pastored large Black word-of-faith congregations. Mumford helps to start *New Wine Magazine* and on the pages of *New Wine Magazine*, in addition to the articles that are being written as part of a charismatic renewal moment, we see the emergence of a tape of the month club moving from marketing sermons to the growth of what is first a tape-of-the-month club moving from marketing sermons to the growth of what is, note, first a tape-of-the-month-club Integrity Communications, which both creates the market, in many ways, for praise and worship and then the music. This is a CD cover, then tape cassettes, but also song sheets, right? And so it’s at one point, on the pages of this magazine we see the marketing and distribution and staging of live events around the genre of praise and worship music. There are other trajectories, we can think of Maranatha music in California. But right here at St. Louis, I think the church was called Grace Worship Center, it’s changed its name and it’s still alive here in the greater St. Louis area. We see the formation of Integrity Publications, Integrity Media Group, and Hosanna Integrity Praise and Worship as one key outlet. And you can think of this as, if you all remember, the Columbia Music Group where you would sign up for 10 CDs for 99 cents and then you’d get one a month. You sign up for Hosanna Integrity, and you can see the sort of standard line, “Give Thanks;” there’s children’s marketing and *they’re* around—these are all staged live experiences that become CDs. [It] expands to Australia, [it] makes way for what would later be Hillsong, what is now one of the largest praise and worship acts and has churches in LA; Rejoice Africa; Spanish speaking; and then distinctly and very important is the idea of men in worship. Right. And what was central to *New Wine Magazine* was the biblical vision of Christian manhood. So we see the weaving

together of manhood with media, with the music, with the marketplace, and also a degree of multiculturalism, right?

And over time this music also begins to take a particular Afro-Protestant history, right? So Bishop Garlington, who you saw in that first slide, in his congregation records “The Solid Rock.” Ron Kenoly records “Jesus is Alive” in ‘89. Alvin Slaughter, who was a lead singer for Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir records two albums, and all of a sudden we see faces figured on the cover, not just on the back as Ron Kenoly is. Right. And we can see sort of the expansion. “We Have Overcome,” in fact before these other albums, was recorded live in a church in Upper Marlboro Maryland, pastored by the Meers—father and son, white pastor at [an] all-Black congregation. And then [in] early 1991 with “Lift Him Up,” Ron Kenoly becomes in many ways the face of, and he becomes in many ways a world-renowned worship leader. This is a flyer marketing him, I believe in Africa, as the bearer and teacher of authentic worship. He would write a book on worship with Dick Bernal, the church that he led worship of in San Jose as his sort of home base. I’ll give you an example of how they brought together manhood with multiculturalism and praise and worship and perfect neoliberal branding.

[Music video plays]

So it’s a way in which a multicultural body of Christ is imagined and staged, Black and white, worshipping together. Filling up in this case the Norfolk Convention Center. Ron Kenoly, prior to this, had a small act as a secular musician covering top 40 music, didn’t work out quite so well, but then becomes the face of praise and worship and is a bridge figure. Right. He is a Black music at a primarily, or majority, white congregation with a multicultural commitment—a sort of bridge figure to what takes the form of urban praise and worship. As Hosana then launches its own imprint, you can see the sign that would go on every album, and rather than Kenoly as the face of this, [...] there’s two key figures. One is a person who used to coordinate worship for promise keepers, right, and the other is Fred Hammond, who comes to be known as the architect of praise and worship as a product of Detroit’s Pentecostal Holiness community. And his recording company would produce all of these urban praise, “praise in the house,” sort of code for Black praise and worship music. So, we have “praise in the house,” “worship in the house,” “shout in the house.”

We see the steady passageway from there, which is Chris Tomlinson, to here, which is Chance topping the charts with gospel music. And here’s just a glimpse of Fred Hammond’s career with the group Commission, sort of “Motown” meets “praise and worship” solo career, and then as he forms a choir at the same time that he launches this recording studio

that produces Hosanna's urban line. And then he goes back to praise and worship just last year with *Worship Journal*. He now is staging these live worship experiences as well.

And to capture the market and the media—and perhaps as a way to close—[I'll] give an example of how this comes together in the studio with a veritable “who’s who” of contemporary gospel praise and worship.

[Music video plays]

So this is Kirk Franklin in the studio at TBN, which you can see down there.

[Music video plays]

So that’s Donnie McClurkin on the right, and there’s Fred Hammond.

[Music video plays]

So it continues to repeat in this way throughout. What’s also interesting to think about [is] the gender dynamics, as you have four men who are all very well-renowned who lead the solos and are in different outfits, and you have two uniform Black women, unnamed, in the back in black. So there’s a way in which there’s a resonance between the gender politics on display here, and the charismatic renewal on the pages of *New Wine*. And how is it that this comes to be, for chance, [...] taken up as a primary source in one of the top most popular gospel music acts?

Now I’ll say, just as a final thought and as an invitation to question in conversation: when I presented this idea about how praise and worship becomes a dominant idiom within Black churches, something that is connected with Jesus—people, hippie Christianity, Evangelical Christianity—that’s read as white, I approached an editor to run this idea by the editor. The editor said, sort of trying to reimagine the logics of appropriations, “Oh, this is a case of Black people appropriating white people’s music!” I’m not quite sure *that* is the best way to understand the asymmetries of music and culture, but I’m hopeful that you’ll help me [to] think through those connections: the similarities, the differences, and the exchange between “Black” and “white” that I believe, again—where we began—Albert Murray challenges; to think about those asymmetries and similarities on new terms. Thank you.

Q&A Session

Attendee 1:

[Question inaudible]

Sorett:

That's a great question. So, [you're asking,] "How do we account for the dramatic increase in black entrance into the Catholic Church?" And I think we can think about the urban encounters between the Catholic Church and black migrants to the cities, which, of course, is not always a pretty story, right? We think about the origins of white flight and the different sorts of contestations—I think of the work of McGreevy and others on the sort of forging of Catholic parishes in the cities—but, then, we also think about the outreach and innovations of the Catholic Church, the CYO, the founding of [...] youth ministries... Claude McKay, [...] in fact, becomes an advisor on race relations to Bishop Shiel [...], who also wrote in publications like *Negro Quarterly* in the years leading up to this. So there's a sort of attraction and an exchange, and, at times, repulsion, but also an effort to embrace and reach out through the schools and through youth programs that is facilitated by proximity occasioned by Great Migration, the other migration to the cities.

Attendee 2:

To follow up on what you say: I'm from, like you all *[gesturing to other attendees]*, Louisiana, and I've done a lot of research on the history of Black Catholics in [...] the area I lived in; I grew up there. And I'm also presently doing research [...] here in the St. Louis area on the slaves at the *[dialogue inaudible]*.

But [to] this question about Black Catholics, this may be anecdotal: [...] in the 1950s, when they integrated the churches in Louisiana—particularly southwest of Louisiana, which has the highest concentration of Black Catholics percentage-wise than any place in the United States—the Bishop responded that rather than integrate the churches, because he was afraid he would lose the Black Catholics, he said, "No, the Black Catholics should keep their own church." Because what happened was that, well, you had two churches in this little town, and most of the people were predominantly Catholic, and which church were you going to keep? You're going to keep the church that has some recognition, a physical building that's in better condition, rather than [...] the building that's kind of run down and needs a lot of work, and most often in these towns it would be a white church, it would be a brick church that's very well, you know, bounded and endowed. And so, in one town that we lived in, my wife and I, [...] you could stare down the street and look down three blocks

and see the Black church and the white church. They were tied together. But what this did was this kept the Black Catholic identity, rather than saying, you know, “Why did you let Black people come to our church?” And the Black people saying, “Well, I don’t want to go to somebody else’s church,” because they’ve grown up, you know, with their own church and their own identity with that group of people.

Sorett

Absolutely, right? And I think [to] your point, [...] while there is an uptick in the 1940s, there is also a long history of Black Catholicism in places like Louisiana and Maryland. So there is a newness, but there’s also a longer history of Black Catholicism, yeah.

Sorett:

Sure, Professor McCune—Jeffrey! Good to see you.

Jeffrey McCune:

Hey! So, I really, really am liking this project. [*Dialogue inaudible*] enter into the conversation, which is your geology (*sic*) around praise and worship, and how it is that we got here with Chance the Rapper as kind of producing this kind of praise and worship.

And so, I’m wondering maybe about a differing genealogy in terms of thinking about Black comedy, like Black Christian comedy, as a site of kind of impersonating, right, white church culture that then becomes like—you know, I remember singing [*sings*] “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” and, like, doing that as a joke to [make fun of] old hymns that we said “white folks sang.” And then, hip hop, being itself, right, but kind of similar using rap which then often responds to the kind of critiques that are embedded in a certain type of comedic [...] gesture. So, for me, there’s kind of a lot of genealogies at play there, and maybe discourses that you might want to speak to in terms of thinking about how this happens.

And the last one that I was thinking about that I think is [...] maybe even *more* interesting is geography. You brought up St. Louis, but being a Chicagoan I’m a little biased.

Sorett:

Oh yeah, yeah! Right? It’s no accident [Chance is] from the home of...

McCune:

It’s no accident he’s from Chicago; it’s no accident both he *and* Kanye, right, both have these gospel albums come out in the same year, right—what I call “gospel” albums...

Sorett:

And *they* called—well, at least Kanye referred to it [as a gospel album].

McCune:

Right, so having those two together, I'm wondering about how you fit in geography, how you fit in [...] Black church comedy, and then how you also factored in the hip hop piece.

Sorett:

Yeah, so those are all great questions. So [...] I'm attempting in this, what you saw here, to tell *one* genealogy as part of a broader project that is attempting to think about the ways in which two parallel developments, which are often narrated as such—that is, the sort of explosion of the evangelical culture industry since the 1960s and the explosion of the Black popular culture industry—converge [...] in something, or are entangled and perhaps were entangled for a longer period of time than this, right? But [we] experienced dramatic growth for, we can think about it as, realignments of market and the media as well as sort of shifting racial discourses.

So yes, I mean we could think about contemporary gospel, and [...] obviously, it makes perfect sense that a Chicago rapper would appeal to—and Chance is very big on, in other songs, talking about digging into his own roots, not having to leave his old church, not having to soul-search, and so it makes sense that he would plumb the depths of—the particularities of the Chicago experience, right? And so there is certainly a Chicago story to be told there; but there's also, for that matter, in terms of praise and worship lineage, we could think of it not just as a transposing of “white folk Christian music,” but also [...] the history of the devotionals, right, alongside the hymnody which has a very similar form. So there are multiple genealogies.

As it relates to the comedic question: I mean I think here, I thought you were actually going someplace different, to think about the way in which tropes around Black church culture are central to something like the Kings of Comedy. And now we have a King of Comedy who double-times as a preacher, an advisor to Trump, and all sorts of other stuff [...]: Steve [Harvey]. So [...] how do we discern the difference between when [Harvey's] caricaturing Black church culture and when he's offering spiritual advice? Right? And I think *that* is also...I mean, the way in which the market facilitates that kind of shift would produce that kind of genealogy. When you think about *Preachers of L.A.*, *Preachers of Detroit*, [...] reality TV remakes the line between the caricature or the performance in ways that I think are not [as] easily dismissed as, “This is false,” and “This is true.” But the context in which those performances are occasioned does matter.

Attendee 3:

I want to go back to the 1940s, to the quote that “all great art is propaganda.”

Sorett:

Yes, yes, yes. [The quote from] Petry, yeah.

Attendee 3:

I think that it’s important for us to understand...what people such as her and DuBois *meant* by “propaganda,” because I think when you hear it these days we have a negative connotation that they did not understand. That’s the first thing I want to get your comment on.

The second thing has to do [with] going back to the genealogy question on worship and praise, because...I’m old enough not to know who the rappers are, and I’m old enough so I don’t care. [Audience laughs]

Sorett:

[Laughing] That’s alright, that’s alright! That’s alright!

Attendee 3:

So...but I *am* interested in the thing that you have to say in terms of the genealogy of praise and worship because I think that, as you said before, there’s a multiplicity of genealogies, much of which goes *all* the way back to slave hollerings, black music, Dorsey...And the problem that Black people have—we have an argument every 20 years or so whether or not Christian music has gotten too secularized.

Sorett:

Right, right! It’s a recurring [argument], all the way back to the [founding], yeah.

Attendee 3:

...all the way back to Dorsey and before that time. So, I’m interested in knowing your idea and your thoughts about how Black worship music, in the context of ritual in Black church, has changed. Because once upon a time, in Black church, before church started, there was...

Sorett:

Devotionals. Yep.

Attendee 3:

...a praise and worship part of the service where the good deacons and everybody stood up and sang Dr. Watts. I know that you've already heard about that...

Sorett:

Yep, [...] that's exactly [right], yep.

Attendee 3:

And then the next thing, as time went on, then you don't get the Dr. Watts anymore—now, you get Hammond. Now you get praise and worship, and I would suggest to you that it's not always as specially coded as you gave us today because we still have [...] people like that.

Sorett:

Absolutely.

Alright, so, first, to the point about art and politics, or art and propaganda: Petry is participating in at least two conversations, right? One is a long-standing debate around the idea of Black art and culture. [...] We could think of not only DuBois's speech (which becomes an essay in *The Crisis* in 1926), "The Criteria of Negro Art," but also the debate that year in the nation between George Schuyler and Langston Hughes, where Langston Hughes talks about "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and George Schuyler, the week before, refers to the whole idea as "The Negro Art Hokum," [...] sort of critically dismissing the idea there *is* such a "Black art." [...] And in between there, Romare Bearden's essay on the dilemma of the Negro artist. And there's a way in which they're pushing back against the idea that Black art is always overdetermined as a question of race, right? And so part of what [...] both Bearden and Petry are pushing back—and Hayden as well—is to suggest that [...] there's no logical explanation other than racism for segregation in the social world and those categories should not then be exported onto the art world, right; those conventions ought to be undone both in the social world and in the world of arts and literature.

At the same time, [Petry's] also intervening in a debate between the growing popularity of figures like Baldwin and Ellison and the rise of the modernist novel, and Richard Wright as *the* most famous Black artist at the time writing in the social-realist tradition, right. And we think of here, [and] quintessential to this conversation, is Baldwin's critique of "right," everybody's "protest novel," [...] and the need for art and literature to move beyond the caricatures of these social types. And part of what Petry does is complicate that, and to say that form and content, social realism and modernist aesthetics, aren't mutually exclusive; there are a set of conventions *within* the social-realist novel that has a social purpose that doesn't necessarily take shape at the expense of aesthetic value.

As it relates to praise and worship—so, I guess to your point around hip hop: I think what’s interesting for me in this moment, yes, this is a recurring debate around where the line of sacred and secular is when the whole story around the formation of modern gospel music is about the idea of “bringing the blues” into the church, right—the ritual space of the church and the debate over the *sound* of it, even if it’s baptized in Christian scripture.

And what’s interesting at *this* moment, as it relates to hip hop, [is] that Chance becomes arguably the most popular “secular” hip hop artist of 2016, who's now...right, if you’re not interested in the content: he’s forced the Grammy’s [...] to create new categories and recognize artists who are not signed to a major label, because [...] he has not signed to a label yet and he’s up for Grammys. And so now...what is it? What’s the technical term for...? Downloaded? I’m not... *Streaming* music, right! Streaming artists have to be considered, right? Because he’s released all his music directly to the internet or to Twitter, particularly, so he’s challenged *that*. But, he’s topping the charts. “How Great is Our God” is not an anomaly, right? The clip right here...

[Video clip plays]

This is Chance on Jimmy Fallon.

[Video clip plays]

So, is this hip hop? Is this gospel? How do we even classify it genre-wise, and what’s at stake [...]? So, for Chance to be doing this, and yet, [...] two years *before* this, a relatively unknown Christian rapper—anyone know who Lecrae is? Right, very few. But a Christian rapper who comes out of largely-white Christian reform [...] circles, tops the Billboard 200, and ends up fronting The Roots on Jimmy Fallon, right, in October 2014. He’s a *Christian* rapper—right?—and now *that’s* also topping the Billboard top charts. And [...] And as he makes his claim on the mainstream, he has a much more tenuous relationship to (*sic*) his church backers who have largely launched him to this celebrity.

So there’s a way in which the classification of “Christian rap” versus “secular rap, of “gospel music” versus “secular music;” whether it’s made by the marketplace; whether it’s made by the church; whether there’s a racial coding to it as there is in the very classification of “urban praise,” [...] right, at the same time, “urban radio” means “Black radio,” as we talk about inner cities, what have you...

So what I’m trying to parse through is those—to use Jeffrey’s [term]—different genealogies that seem to converge in new ways in this moment, yeah. I mean, Kanye, if we were to go back, was nominated for a Gospel Music Award when he came out with “Jesus Walks...”

...And then the group that nominated him rescinded the offer because they listened to the rest of the album and determined it wasn't gospel! *[Audience laughs]*

Attendee 4:

Thank you so much for your talk; it brought up so many points that I've been thinking about for a while.

My question is: [...] as I think about Petry and Hayden and I also think about Fred Hammond and Ron Kenoly, and I think about Chance, I'm wondering about the sort of different relationships to the market—the different *perceived* relationships—that they have to the market under those contexts. And to go a little bit further into that: I'm thinking about Hayden and his, sort of, being pushed to the side and, sort of, shoving the idea of how much capitalist gain he might be able to get off of his work—maybe intentionally, maybe not intentionally, right? He just couldn't; that [option] hadn't been open to him. And I'm thinking about Chance making the choice to not sign with a label and sort of do this in his own way [...], versus the Fred Hammond string, or versus [...] the Black Art Movement making its own ways through Detroit. I'm from Detroit; I grew up in the church that Fred Hammond used to lead for praise and worship...

Sorett:

[Laughing] Yeah, no, well I may have to interview *you* so you can answer that question for me, I think, right? *[Audience laughs]*

[...] I haven't given as much thought to the question of the marketplace as it relates to the literary text, but [...] I try to make note of the degree to which, right, Hayden is making these sort of claims at the genesis of his career, and it takes several decades before he signs a commercial contract at the same time that he's dismissed as "out of step" with the time as it relates to Black artists. And so whether that's a strategic—at least, if we take the words of Credo, it's a *strategic*—choice to not be bought, right, either by white critics or Black leaders, right...But whether that's also, itself, a particular position that achieves a certain degree of authority and credibility, and fits within another frame...

[...] We talk about Chance [and he says], "I don't write songs for free, I write them for freedom," which has a sort of resonance with Kanye saying [that] if he writes about Jesus, "his record's not gonna play." We *know* that records about Jesus play well in this particular moment, right? *[Audience laughs]* And we *also* know that artists are making less and less

money off of the albums that they have to sign to and [are] making *more* from the tours! So, Chance...we could see it as a strike of brilliance that he learned before he signed that he was actually going to make more money when he was on the road with Childish Gambino and others, and didn't *need* Kanye to sign. He could maintain creative control. Right? And yet, it also positions him to make a claim for a degree of political autonomy in ways, so the sacrifice, sort of, serves a market purpose in a different way. I don't know if that gets at some of the questions you were [wondering about], yeah.

Attendee 5:

[Question inaudible]

Sorett:

Oh! [So you're asking,] "Why is Black theology not followed within most Black churches?"

Attendee 5:

Right!

Sorett:

Got it. Yeah.

Attendee 5:

Right [...] so what is the main reason?

And my second question is...

Sorett:

[Laughing] That's a great question. *[Gesturing to specific audience member]* You want to answer that one?

Attendee 5:

You got it? *[dialogue inaudible]* the difference between Black theology, and the Black Power Movement, and the Black Art Movement?

Sorett:

Oh, the relation between Black theology, "Black Power," and the Black Art [Movement]. Okay, yes. Alright, maybe I could start there before answering the larger question.

So, we could think of Black theology, if we want to trace it, through, I guess, two of the leading proponents—one in the pastorate and one in academia, James Cone and Albert Cleage, in the 1960s, right—as a direct response to the claims made about race and religion by the Black Power Movement, both in its aesthetic and organized political form, right. Cone writes at length about feeling as though [...] his Christianity was called to task in light of claims of Black Power, and so he writes a Black theology in order to defend [*chuckling*], or rearticulate, Christian faith in light of the legitimacy of Black Power’s critiques of the...I guess...impotence or inadequateness of Black churches’ ability to deal with the racial turmoil of the 1960s.

I think if we turn to the Black Arts Movement, at least as I try to write about it in *Spirit in the Dark*, there’s at least three developments that we can see. One: it is [...] to follow Cleage and others—[...] Cleage, who, as part of his installation of a Black theology in his church, adorns the wall with this large image of the Black Madonna. And so, this idea of creating a new iconography, a new aesthetic that represents a Black theology, a Black liberation theology, is central, right? And so he’s not alone in doing that. But then you also have central theorists to the Black arts, like Larry Neal, who argue that Black Power activists are going to have to take the Black church more seriously. Right, and so there’s I think a number of ways in which the Black Arts Movement figures engage with Christianity and try to reimagine it on more radical terms. Larry Neal referred to it as a “new spirituality.”

You also have, right, with Malcolm X, who’s often figured as a patron saint—we think of Dudley Rose’s (*sic*) anthology *For Malcolm* in 1965, in the aftermath of his assassination, and there’s a way in which Black Islam is appealed to as the *true* religion of the Black man, and Black women and Black men take this up who are in the Black Arts Movement. Amiri Baraka is one of the stories; he tells about why he divorced himself from the downtown scene and created the Black Arts Repertory Theatre [which] was in part because of Malcolm’s assassination, right, and so Islam figures in how he refigures himself as “Imamu Amiri Baraka.”

And then a third [development] is in the 1960s, also: a renewed appeal to Africa, as in African-derived religious traditions. We think of Baba Osejeman’s Yoruba Temple in Harlem, and this effort to appeal to African-derived religions as an authentic bearer of Black identity. So, both an appeal to Africa, and to Islam, and a reimagining of Christian identity—we see all those things taking place within the Black Arts Movement.

As it relates to Black theology not seemingly taking full shape within Black churches: I think this is [...] one of the reasons Albert Murray is so important, right? The vast majority of African American churches are evangelical in their orientation, right? The terms under which Black folk in large number embraced the Christian faith was the evangelical

revivalism of the 19th century, [...] but it was a different kind of evangelicalism, right, that had more organic connections to the Women's Movement, to abolitionism, right. So there was a way in which [...] progressive politics was organically tied up with an evangelical worship experience, and there, at least in large part, is not a similar pairing in more recent iterations of Black theology. We get a very impassioned articulation, but perhaps not the same sort of worship experience to go with it, and it's often read as an export, right, or an import from a foreign source to the churches [...] and largely read as a *secular* one, right. We might ask what "secular" stands in for there.

Marie Griffith:

So, these are great materials. I guess, I'm curious: so the first part of your talk was about words, right?

Sorett:

Yes, that's right.

Griffith:

But then we turn to music...

Sorett:

Yep.

Griffith:

...and we really put out musical styles...

[...] And so I guess I was wondering about the words that have been in the music, and just thinking about these endless [...] appropriations and goings (*sic*) back and forth. I haven't thought a lot about praise music since I finished my research on musical fellowship...

Sorrett:

[*Laughing*] Yep...

Griffith:

...which was predominately in white circles; but, you know, those were a certain kind of lyrics that were (*sic*) very potentially, in their view, not political, that they were the status quo...apolitical, of course. And so I'm thinking about, wow, you know, then you've got all this *other* that I would think—you've already suggested that—has, you know, a more political side to it. And I'm wondering what happens then with those appropriations and you've got

these racist congregations; [...] can you tell us a story about [...] the lyrics and message that's going on there? [...]

Sorrett:

So, yeah, I mean, I guess the question I would ask is—and I don't know that I have the answer to this yet, [...] and I'm trying to figure out—how to think about the relationship between content and form, right? Because, in the same way that devotional services take up these traditional hymns from the 19th century, there's very little done lyrically...When you see Kirk Franklin playing "How Great is Our God," it's the same sort of vision of personal piety that, if not explicitly articulated as such, we might read as de-political (*sic*), individualized, spiritual connection directly to God. It doesn't seem to narrate the sort of long history of Black freedom that's associated—right, if we think of one way of reading gospel music as the soundtrack of migrants moving to the North and to the city. But in that regard, then, we might read praise and worship as part of the passage into "post-racial America" that has a particular kind of currency, right, in spaces.

At the same time, [...] there is something distinctive [...], whether it be Fred Hammond or the figures that we've seen here [like] Chance, that...I mean, here I think about Stewart Hall's idea of what *is* "the Black," what is this "Black" in "Black popular culture." Chance is *not* Chris Tomlin[son], right? There is a distinctive, we might call, politics to the way in which he performs a Black version, right? Now, it's not [...] "pure," right? But [...] we are in a moment where we take for granted, where we take a lead from Stuart Hall in that there are no "pure" forms. And that's, again, where I think where Albert Murray's theorizing of the entanglement is not to eschew the asymmetries of race and politics, but is to call for a language that [...] doesn't flatten out those differences, but also recognizes that even in the most segregated precincts, there's a whole lot that's shared.

And so, I'm still trying to figure out how to write about that, but in a large part, the lyrics are...Who's the [...] praise and worship [singer...], he's very much in this idiom, he's sort of "neo-soul" meets "praise and worship?" Travis...Greene, I think, is it? Who is it that [was] invited and accepted the call to go sing at the Inauguration? And his most popular song is, what? [Quoting song] "All Things Are Working for My Good?"¹ Right? So it's also [got] a hint of a prosperity, personal actualization message, so it's very "neoliberal," whatever that might [mean], right. So, that's a long way of saying yes, it's very political, even if the lyrics are...yes.

Attendee 6:

¹ Here, Sorrett means Travis Greene's 2015 song "Intentional."

So I was wondering [...], coming back to the 1940s, about two things...two dimensions you've found that seem to point to or explain in some way Petry and Hayden.

One I think would be [...] the rise of a global philosophy called existentialism, which opens the door for Black writers because it's a philosophy that so appeals with [*dialogue inaudible*] people. It opens the door for Black writers to talk about Black individualism, and so it leads to novels in the early '50's like *Beetlecreek* [by William Demby] and Richard Wright's *The Outsider*—which is explicitly a Black existential novel.

And the other thing is the rise of what, in the American canon, is a “middle-ground culture.” The rise of a “middle-ground culture,” I think, has a potential impact on African American music and, I would say, directly relates to the rise of technology in the late 1940s for the long-playing record. The long-playing record changed, for instance, how people see jazz music. And as a result of the long-playing record, people listen to jazz differently, but also artists look at how to present their music differently, because the long-playing record can give you a truer view, or a truer understanding of what jazz music is, as opposed to the 78 millimeter frequency style. So, it could be argued that the rise of this music helped to create the rise of jazz as “middle-ground” music, which *clearly* happens in the 1950s. [...]

So, those would be two things I would mention as rising out of the 1940s that would affect the very phenomenon that you were talking about with Petry and Hayden.

Sorett:

Yeah, wow. So, I mean, I think in ways...with regard to your second point...I mean, I take that as a serious challenge: [...] the limits of just attention to the texts themselves, right. [Your point] is a reimagining in that moment [of] also the relationship between content and form and how it takes place in literary production, one that—I admit—I don't do much of in the book. [*Laughing*]

As it relates to existentialism: I don't pay an extended deal of attention to existentialism in particular. But to the, sort of, cross-pollination and international networks that were forming in these literary circles: certainly, absolutely. And that is part of the sort of broader discussion of both Petry and Wright, and the host of figures that are in conversation at [...] conferences, right, and the like. So that's part of the conversation. I'm now looking forward to writing the second edition that will take that more seriously! [*Laughing*]

Thank you.