

“What in God’s Name is the Point?!”: Theorizing Ritual, Representation and Resistance in African American Religious Thought and Practice

Michael Brandon McCormack
University of Louisville

Abstract

This essay examines the relationship between worship and theory in African American religious thought and practice. It situates this inquiry within long-standing debates among black intellectuals concerning the contested relationships between black worship and political activism. While contemporary scholarship has resisted reductionist accounts of black religious worship as antithetical to activism, there has been little exploration of the links between black worship and the political activism of the hip-hop generations. As such, the essay turns to theoretical perspectives developed within Cultural Studies in order to examine the ways that the representational politics and “moral panics” surrounding contemporary black youth culture inform recent black rituals of resistance. The theoretical inquiry in the essay is grounded in the concrete case of Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou’s recent performances of religious ritual on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri. The essay argues that Rev. Sekou’s account of the links between ritual, representation, and resistance demonstrates a theoretically informed religio-political praxis deployed on behalf of black youth who have been marginalized, criminalized, policed, and executed in post-Civil Rights America.

“Worship in the Black Church is an activist and participatory event. The people are beckoned toward their highest good and toward service in the interest of justice. The old folks used to call this praying with one eye open. To pray without an understanding of the relationship of prayer to justice would have been unusual under the circumstances... [Yet, the] connection between activism and worship is not always obvious.”
- Barbara Holmes, “Worship in the African American Tradition”¹

“On Moral Monday as a part of Ferguson October, a group of faith leaders were arrested as we prayed and called on the police to repent for being part of an evil system of policing. As an act of resistance we created a memorial for the Mike Browns of America. Rev. Charles Burton, a local pastor and activist, laid down on the soaked ground. His body was traced with chalk and candles lit. Pastors and Rabbis read the unarmed names of those killed by the police. Clergy positioned themselves along the police line to take confession. We, then, advanced towards the entrance of the police station. Police placed batons against a few of our throats, swung wildly at others, but we prayed, raised our voices in song and worship. We moved again to enter the police station to [sic] and many were thrown to the ground and arrested. Seventeen of us were charged with assault against a law enforcement officer, along with the blanket charge of disturbance of the peace (ironically, given the ever-present chant off ‘No justice, no peace’).”
-Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, “The Gospel is not a Neutral Term: An Interview with Rev. Sekou”²

“Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God's name is the point of cultural studies?...At that point, I think anybody who is into cultural studies seriously as an intellectual practice, must feel, on their pulse, its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we've been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything. If you don't feel that as one tension in the work that you are doing, theory has let you off the hook. On the other hand, in the end, I don't agree with the way this dilemma is often posed for us, for it is indeed a more complex and displaced question than just people dying out there...[cultural studies] has to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death.”
-Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies”³

Taken together, the lengthy—but provocative—quotations above serve as points of departure for examining the contested relationships between worship and theory in black religious thought and practice. In this essay, I am interested in the role of theory in clarifying what moral philosopher and religionist Barbara Holmes has described as the profound and often obscured relationship between worship and activism within the black American experience. I develop this inquiry against the backdrop of a longstanding academic suspicion of the relationship between black worship and activism. Historically, such academic accounts have positioned these modes of action as diametrically opposed *except* during periods of radicalization such as the abolitionist and Civil rights movements. This essay attempts to disrupt such bifurcated accounts by examining

how *contemporary* religious activists strategically perform ritual practices in public spaces as acts of *both* worship *and* resistance to injustice. Moreover, this work endeavors to clarify *how* contemporary black religious activists (clergy, as well as the everyday people who join them) use embodied ritual performances to actualize the “prophetic” *potential* of religion by linking such actions not only with the political and the practical, but also with popular culture as a strategic site of struggle.⁴

I am particularly concerned with the ways that oppositional religious practices are deployed in response to the representational politics and “moral panics” that surround working class and poor black youth who have come of age in the post-Civil Rights era. As political scientist Cathy Cohen has persuasively argued, such “moral panics” socially construct and culturally represent black youth as morally deviant and socially dangerous. Moreover, this often leads to the heightened surveillance, policing, incarceration and, most tragically, the death of black youth.⁵ In this essay I am interested in the usefulness of Cultural Studies in theorizing modes of black ritual performance as simultaneously acts of worship and cultural resistance in response to what the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall rightly described as “the urgency of people dying in the streets.”⁶

These theoretical inquiries are grounded in the concrete case of Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou’s public performance of ritual practices—such as singing, corporate prayer, testimony, and lamentation—as a socio-political intervention in the criminalization and targeting of black youth in Ferguson, Missouri.⁷ I argue that Rev. Sekou’s embodied ritual of resistance demonstrates a liberationist theological perspective on religious worship (as an act of bearing witness and demonstrating solidarity with the oppressed in public spaces of protest) that is linked to a practical and political concern for the “the urgency of people dying in the streets” (the shooting of Michael Brown and numerous cases of other unarmed black teenagers by an increasingly militarized police force). As a means of resistance, Sekou’s public performance of religious ritual is also informed by a keen theoretical understanding of what Stuart Hall describes as “the constitutive and political nature of representation” (the ways that black youth are consistently represented within public discourse as morally “deviant” and socially “dangerous”). I contend that Sekou’s self-reflexive practical theology and theoretically informed religio-political praxis demonstrates Hall’s insistence on holding in tension a commitment to the “insights which theory can bring to political [and religious] practice” while at the same time acknowledging “the necessary modesty of theory.”⁸

By taking up the theme of “worship, ritual and theory” in this manner, I seek to contribute to an ongoing discussion of how theoretical perspectives in Cultural Studies inform what religious philosophers Eddie Glaude and Cornel West describe as the necessity of “a more critical analysis of the discursive and ritualistic formations [of black religion] that question traditional scholarly categories and open up new sites for investigation.”⁹ Moreover, I endeavor to analyze black religious practices in a manner that is neither reducible nor hostile to practical theological interpretations.¹⁰ Rather, I attempt to heed calls for more critical and analytical approaches to theorizing black religious experience, thought, and performance while refusing to abandon theological interpretations as

crucial resources for making sense of the complexity of black religious discourse and practice. According to Victor Anderson, such an approach not only analyzes and critiques the “dark side” of religion, but also “[affirms] creative possibilities of the cultural fulfillment of Black people by seeing within African American religious experience possibilities for realizing our political, social and spiritual strivings.”¹¹

“Praying with One Eye Open”: Beyond Reductionist Accounts of Black Religious Worship and Activism

In the first of the quotations above, Barbara Holmes de-familiarizes a prevailing narrative within scholarship on African American religion regarding black worship practices. This narrative tends to fix performances of liturgical and ritual practices within the boundaries of ecclesial institutions and interpret them as *at best* diversions from social action if not in fact *antithetical* to struggles for justice. While Holmes interprets the black worship experience as profoundly linked to concrete struggles against injustice, she acknowledges the ways that the complexity of such links remains obfuscated within the public imagination. On the one hand, these links are often obscured by certain commonsense and/or theologically conservative interpretations of the “priestly” functions of black religious worship. On the other hand, academic critiques of the accommodationist functions of religious ritual often fail to fully acknowledge possibilities for “prophetic” resistance within ritual practices. In both cases, religious rituals are presumed merely to serve the interests of “institutional” religion, and thus the dominant social order. The former position tends to view worship as primarily a Christian practice oriented towards expressions of piety that acknowledge human dependence upon God as the source of being, redemption, and eschatological hope. This perspective views worship primarily as a religious ritual that is first and foremost a liturgical performance of the doctrines of the Church. In this view, there is no *necessary* link between religious worship and acts of political activism, social protest, and/or resistance to injustice.

Within African American traditions, however, the practices of Christian worship have been historically *signified* in far more complex ways. The contested meanings of worship in the black experience must be understood against the backdrop of centuries of religiously and politically sanctioned acts of terror—what sociologist Orlando Patterson has referred to as “rituals of blood”—that have historically been visited upon black bodies in the United States (and throughout the African Diaspora).¹² In this sense, black worship can be viewed as an *inherent protest* against dehumanization because of its insistence on black dignity as “children of God.” As the Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou has argued,

The creation of the black church was in protest against white evangelical Christianity, which justified black people’s enslavement. Beginning with the Free African Society all the way through the founding of my beloved Church of God in Christ, every black church formation had to contend with, in some form or another, the racist society that dehumanized, demonized, and at times decapitated (literally and existentially) their beings.¹³

For Sekou, the liturgical performances of his own youth were instrumental in fostering a sense of self-worth. He recalls, "In the singing, prayers, testimony, and other liturgical expressions of my youthful worshipping community, Jesus was hope in hopeless circumstances."¹⁴ Yet this hope was not an "otherworldly" longing for eschatological redemption, but rather a deep-seated hope for an "other" world that has inspired and sustained involvement in movements for social justice and radical democracy.

As historian Barbara Savage reminds us, there has long been a vigorous debate among black intellectuals on the relationship of socio-political action to ritual performance, especially the ecstatic modes of black worship which W.E.B. DuBois described as "the frenzy."¹⁵ Savage notes that especially among early black social scientists such as E. Franklin Frazier, scholarly accounts of black religion "...deny the possibility that religious belief and practice could be ecstatic in its expressiveness...and still produce political motivations for organized change; here, they followed scholarly notions about the incompatibility of charismatic forms of religion and activism."¹⁶

Such scholarly accounts, often rooted in Marxist and Freudian traditions, tend to represent a social-scientific and functionalist reduction of black religion to an "other-worldly" expression of compensation for socio-political and economic oppression.

Cultural anthropologist, Marla Frederick, has argued against the hegemony of such interpretations of black religion, which fail to take seriously the complexity of the relationship between political engagement and the lived religious experiences of African Americans. Her ethnographic work describes the interplay between worshipful expressions of "gratitude" for the sheer gift of life on the one hand and the sense of "righteous discontent" that leads black women to protest the material conditions and relations of power that impinge upon their everyday lives on the other. Frederick thus argues that functionalist reductions "[are] not only condescending but also [fail] to come to terms with the complexity of religious faith."¹⁷

Ironically, liberationist theological interpretations of black religious experience have at times been equally dismissive and reductive of certain worship practices in the Black Church tradition. Such interpretations create sharp dichotomies between the so-called "priestly" (read: conservative) and "prophetic" (read: critical) functions of black religion. In the most ideologically driven theological readings of black religion, "praise" and "protest" are framed as diametrically opposed responses to black suffering, with only the latter being representative of "authentic" black religion. Historian and critic Clarence Taylor goes so far as to argue that not only has religion been slighted by the social sciences, but that "[a]ccording to proponents of black theology, black churches and black ministers lost their revolutionary fervor by the dawn of the twentieth century and became advocates of accommodation."¹⁸

While Taylor's assessment of black theology seems overstated, he rightly points to a certain tendency among black theologians to eye the more expressive forms of black worship with suspicion, as a diversion from a more "prophetic" public witness. In an essay entitled, "Black Theology and Birmingham: Revisiting a Conversation on Culture," Jonathan Walton argues that

black theologians, in their premature and uncritical dismissal of contemporary forms of worship, especially in black mega churches, risk reinscribing tired tropes of spiritual escapism over against social engagement.¹⁹ In this sense, rigid conceptions of black religion that mirror what Frederick C. Harris has referred to as “opiate theories” and “inspiration theories” of religion within the social sciences, also characterize some theological interpretations of black religion—especially its ostensibly “other-worldly” worship traditions.²⁰

Here we would be wise to heed R. Marie Griffith’s and Barbara Savage’s caution to avoid a “narrow dichotomous view that religious participation signifies either gullible capitulation to structures of oppression or an emancipatory overthrow of them.”²¹ In her work on black religion and politics, Savage argues that shortsighted views on the relationship between the expressive performance of black religion and mobilization for political action demonstrate “the inherent limitations of the tools of empiricism and intellectualism, especially in their encounter with religion.”²² Rather, Savage points toward the necessity of engaging the “lived” experience of black religion with theoretical rigor and in ways that disclose “negotiations of power and identity in ordinary life, within ecclesial structures...and outside them in domestic life and in a wide variety of so-called public spheres.”²³ This approach to the study of black religion “[focuses] chiefly on people whose lives have been ruptured by social, political, and historical circumstances, and such work highlights multiple creative uses of religion in the midst as well as the aftermath of these dynamic changes.”²⁴

Barbara Holmes’ work on the worshipping practices of black religion is closer to the approach that Savage and Griffith have called for. Victor Anderson describes Holmes’ work as advancing beyond narrow functionalist accounts of the social sciences and the ideological limitations of certain theological accounts of black religion by embracing “a more rigorous engagement with Black Church Studies, Black Theology, and Womanist Theology *and critical methods circulating throughout Black Cultural Studies*” (emphasis added).²⁵ As such, Holmes challenges more limited perspectives that dichotomize the black worship experience and black political activism by attempting to connect what she describes as the much neglected “mystical aspect of the black church” and its “contemplative practices” with its “prophetic” and activist traditions. In this way, Holmes deconstructs a prevailing discourse about black church worship that has long been overdetermined by a pejorative reading of DuBois’ description of “the frenzy,” the most ecstatic expressions of black religion.²⁶

For instance, in Holmes’ work the “contemplative” is allowed to coexist and even become simultaneous with the ecstatic. Such ritual practices of contemplation, Holmes argues, have often been inextricably linked to mobilization for political action. Indeed she insists, “To pray without an understanding of the relationship of prayer to justice would have been unusual under the circumstances.”²⁷ Nevertheless, Holmes does not argue that black worship always or necessarily leads *directly* to political activism. Rather, she acknowledges the ways that conceptions of the black church as *mere* “refuge” from struggle more often than not produced practices of worship that were fundamentally disengaged from the more confrontational political engagement of the

Civil Rights movement and other periods of radical black activism. Nonetheless, Holmes leaves these competing tendencies in tension, claiming, “During the sprint toward equality, however, certain perspectives surfaced in ways that allowed the community to hold contradictory beliefs and ideas in dialectal tension without collapsing options into one category or another.”²⁸ As such, Holmes invites a more theoretically nuanced account of the relationship between religious practice and socio-political activism.

In his work, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism*, political scientist, Frederick C. Harris also argues for a more nuanced account of black religious practices that resists the dichotomy of “opiate theories” versus “inspiration theories.”²⁹ Harris argues that while a number of scholars (especially within the social sciences) have critiqued the lack of direct involvement of *institutional* black churches in political activism, especially in the post-Civil Rights era, such scholars have failed to take seriously the influence of black religious *culture* as a factor in mobilizing political activism.³⁰ As Harris rightly argues, such scholarship “does not tell us much about how or why popular culture directly promotes political activism, nor does it speak to how culture works politically for dominated groups in democratic societies.”³¹ Like Marla Frederick, Barbara Savage and Barbara Holmes, Harris seeks to move beyond narrow functionalist accounts of black religion that do not account for the complex ways that black religious leaders and everyday black folks deploy religious *culture* for the purposes of “the construction of meaning for action.”³² As Holmes has argued, this limited perspective obscures the relationship between forms of black religious culture, such as ritual activity, to political activism. To the contrary, Harris posits, “Expressed through symbols and performed through rituals, religion among African Americans inspires action by (re)inventing meaning for targeted goals.”³³

Consistent with Harris’ argument about the uses of black religious culture, Holmes gives attention to “practices that emerge out of the collective imagination of the worshipping community” while not necessarily limiting those practices to the official ritual performances of the institutional black church. By giving attention to how black religion transcends its institutional strictures, she points to the ways black religious *culture* becomes a resource for various forms of political activism. Holmes insists:

[t]he spiritual practices become public theology through acts of shared liturgical discernment. These acts of shared contemplation move individual mystical events from the personal and private toward the public and pragmatic. Accordingly, the inward journey transcends the private imagination to become an expanded communal testimony.³⁴

This notion of using religious ritual as “an expanded communal testimony” is consistent with Harris’ argument concerning black religious *culture* as a resource for activism that is not bound by the parameters of the institutional Black Church. As Rev. Sekou writes, “the signs, symbols and stories bequeathed to me in rural Arkansas resonated with powerful notions of justice for the poor, democracy for all, and god’s desire for human freedom. Folks who were just two-and-a-half generations from slavery and functionally illiterate taught me the profundity of democracy and religion.”³⁵

Theoretical “Sites of Life and Death”: Black Youth Culture, Moral Panic, and the Politics of Representation

While it has been well documented within recent scholarship that religious rituals and rhetoric were used for political ends during the abolitionist and Civil Rights movements, much less attention has been devoted to the ways that contemporary religious activists deploy religious rituals and rhetoric to construct meaning for political mobilization on behalf of and with black youth of the hip-hop generation.³⁶ Though Harris discusses the use of religious culture in the post-civil rights era, he does not give attention to the fraught relationship between black *church culture* (including its rituals, rhetoric and other cultural productions) and black *youth culture* of the post-Civil Rights era. Yet, Barbara Holmes has persuasively argued:

Today increasing numbers of young people believe that the black church exists in a time warp, with slavery as its originating marker and civil rights as its culminating goal. Their history lessons have taught them that the black church is situated in a particular historical framework, but they also know that its traditions seldom include the concerns of a generation suckled on hip hop, “terror,” and economic instability.³⁷

Holmes’ interpretation of the fraught relationship between black churches and black youth of the hip-hop generation(s) is true not only because black religious leaders have neglected the concerns of black youth, but also because they have often collaborated with voices in the mainstream to represent black youth as socially “deviant.” Elsewhere I have argued that black preachers have often, wittingly or unwittingly, contributed to the “moral panic” surrounding black youth, thus providing religious legitimacy to increased surveillance, policing, and incarceration of black youth.³⁸ My research, however, does not simply suggest that black preachers have used their sermons, ritual performances, and public theological discourses in ways that impede struggles for justice for black youth. To do so would be to mirror the reductionist accounts of the social sciences. Rather, as Griffith and Savage have argued in their call for an interdisciplinary and theoretically rigorous examination of “lived religion,” my approach is neither “wholly celebratory” of black religious practices “nor entirely critical.”³⁹ Rather, I seek to describe and analyze the various ways that black religious leaders have used religious language, symbols, and ritual practices in ways that both contribute to and critique representational politics that construct black youth as “deviant,” “dangerous,” and even “demonic.”

In order to do this work, I draw upon the theoretical discourses of Cultural Studies, particularly theories of “moral panic.”⁴⁰ As such, I want to briefly make what the late Stuart Hall has referred to as a “necessary detour through theory.”⁴¹ The usefulness of Cultural Studies for this style of theorizing black religion is rooted in its concern with examining various cultural practices, their relationships to power, and the ways that these power relations in turn shape those cultural practices. Furthermore, Cultural Studies allows greater interpretive possibilities for religious rituals because of its attentiveness to the various social and political contexts in which cultural practices manifest

themselves (especially when these rituals are deployed beyond the context of the institutional church). Moreover, the theoretical perspectives that inform Cultural Studies work not only to decode and critique the complex ways that symbolic systems construct forms of meaning, identity, and subjectivity that lead to cultural hegemony, but also (at their best) suggest cultural strategies for intervention.⁴²

Along these lines, I argue that a Cultural Studies approach to the study of black religion promises to offer not only a more critical analysis of the uses of religious culture for black activism, but also how popular culture shapes and is shaped by contemporary black religious activists' sense of political agency. I am also concerned with questions of *why* and *how* religious activists turn to popular culture as a site of political struggle. As the late Stuart Hall argued in a seminal essay, "What we are talking about is the struggle over cultural hegemony, which is these days waged as much in popular culture as anywhere else."⁴³ As such, I contend that Cultural Studies helps to illumine the ways religion contributes to and resists the cultural construction of dominant values and regimes of representation that "work to shape how people see, interpret, and act as socialized and political beings."⁴⁴ Moreover, my research examines the ways that these cultural constructions lead to what sociologists and cultural theorists have referred to as the "moral panic" surrounding black youth.

In its most basic terms, "moral panic" can be described as the construction of certain groups within public discourse and representational practices in ways that demonize them as *the* source of moral decline within society. Theorists such as Kenneth Thompson argue that moral panics typically emerge during periods of significant social change and anxiety. During historical moments when moral values are being challenged, or transgressed, certain demographics (particularly youth and ethnic minorities) are deemed threats to the moral order of society. In his work on moral panics, Thompson argues that "no age group is more associated with risk in the public imagination than that of 'youth.'"⁴⁵ As the object of moral panics, youth are particularly noteworthy as they may be perceived "as both at risk and a source of risk."⁴⁶

The tension I pointed out above between youth as simultaneously "endangered and dangerous" is especially significant when discussing *black* youth. Moral panics surrounding the behavior and culture of black youths often lead to their *public policing* and increased incarceration of young blacks perceived as morally deviant. With reference to riots among black youth in Brixton during the 1970s and 1980s, Black British theologian Robert Beckford discusses the significance of work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in describing the ways that the cultural representation of black youth in public discourse rendered them vulnerable to the brutal repressive tactics of the British police. Beckford writes, "To justify high unemployment and cuts in welfare spending, a discourse was constructed that presented Black youth as a 'problem.' The role of the police was to enforce the new authoritarianism of the State. The prevalence of this discourse made it difficult for institutions to engage with the African Caribbean community without pathologizing them."⁴⁷

Within the U.S. context, S. Craig Watkins has argued that “black youth seemingly have been in the eye of a public storm against crime, drugs, and the alleged erosion of traditional values. As a result, new punitive technologies and legislation have been initiated in order to exercise greater control over black youth.”⁴⁸ Moreover, moral panics surrounding black youth culture in post-Civil Rights era America have not only led to greater policing and incarceration, but also the death of black youth considered to be “the problem.”⁴⁹ In what follows I briefly consider how theoretical perspectives on the moral panic surrounding black youth inform Rev. Osagyefo Sekou’s ritual performance on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri.

“Standing in the Gap”: Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, “Deviant” Black Youth, and Rituals of Resistance

The second and third quotations that began this essay signal the profound tension between religious rituals, academic theory, and urgent realities of life and death. Rev. Osagyefo Sekou’s visceral account of his experiences and struggles on the streets of Ferguson, Missouri raises Stuart Hall’s question, “Against the urgency of people dying in the streets, what in God’s name is the point of cultural studies?”⁵⁰ Below, I attempt to wrestle with this question by grounding it in the concrete accounts Rev. Sekou describes in his interview with Medium.com, in his subsequent commentary at the “Keep Ferguson Alive!” panel discussion streamed via Internet from Union Theological Seminary in New York, as well as in his earlier writings on religion, political activism, and black youth culture.

In his first book *Urban Souls*, Sekou describes the demonization and criminalization of black youth in *St. Louis* and the resulting police response. Furthermore, Sekou describes his own experiences of harassment by the St. Louis police as a black youth, beginning in the late 1980s.⁵¹ These experiences led Rev. Sekou to write, “Whenever African Americans are automatically classified as criminals, lives are in danger for there are some law enforcement officers that are ready and willing to assume their role as state vigilantes.”⁵² Sekou’s commentary demonstrates a keen awareness of Hall’s theoretical argument concerning, “the constitutive and political nature of representation itself.”⁵³ The politics of representation have always had dire consequences for black Americans. This is especially the case when the culture of the black urban poor, especially black youth culture, is represented as thoroughly pathological or “deviant” and thus poor black youth are deemed not only responsible for their plight, but also deserving of the most severe forms of punishment.⁵⁴

Along these lines, the cultural representation of black youth is a theoretical concern with “life and death” implications. In an essay entitled “Marooned in America: Black Urban Youth Culture and Social Pathology,” cultural theorist Tommy Lott argues that “Black urban males have been depicted in mass media as the number-one criminal threat to America.”⁵⁵ Lott drives home the point in a manner quite consistent with Sekou’s observations, arguing, “The mass media’s

labeling of black men as criminals serves in the consciousness of many whites as a justification of antiblack vigilantism.”⁵⁶ As such, Sekou’s early writings connect this concern for pathologized representations of black youth with specific cases in St. Louis that eerily foreshadow the Michael Brown case. More than a decade ago Sekou wrote, “St. Louis police officers acted in a vigilante capacity when they brutally beat Derrick Bell, a mentally retarded man; when they shot Garland Carter in the back; when they gunned down unarmed Ronald Beasley and Walter Murray.”⁵⁷

After exploring the lyrics of St. Louis-based hip-hop artists, which gave voice to these violent realities, Sekou maintained that such cultural productions by black youth “are no more problematic to the city’s image than the political machine, which fuel [sic] the crisis.”⁵⁸ For Sekou, these poor black urban youth and their hip-hop cultural productions have long given voice to a form of “urban military seize [sic]” that existed decades before Ferguson. As a result, Sekou lamented:

What is sad yet prophetic is that the Hip-Hop utterances of 20 years ago are still appropriate in today’s urban settings. It clearly denotes that very little amelioration in terms of community building has occurred. In fact, the behavior of some cities suggests that there is a denial to recognize juvenocrats as viable citizens in our urban spaces. Will we hear their pain and heed their call to ‘check ourselves before we wreck ourselves?’⁵⁹

Sekou builds upon this critique in his book *Gods, Gays, and Guns: Essays on Religion and the Future of Democracy*. In his essay “Spiritual not Religious,” Rev. Sekou levels a relentless critique of “the lack of value attributed to poor black and brown youth voices in the academy, the inability of the black church to relate to youth, and above all the sheer lack of courage among African-American religious leaders...to sit at the feet of young folks and engage them in [a] sustained way.”⁶⁰ For Sekou, this generational disconnect is largely the result of black elites “with petite bourgeois sensibilities concerning youth. In [a] word, the problem with black folks is young black folks- ala Bill Cosby.”⁶¹ Sekou’s perspective is consistent with Cathy Cohen’s critique of the ways that moral panics surrounding black youth culture not only emerge within the dominant culture, but are also produced and/or reproduced by black elites who express disdain for “deviant” black youth.⁶² After describing hip-hop as an alternative space of meaning-making for black youth who are alienated from black churches, Sekou argues that a critical engagement with black youth and the forms of popular culture that they create and consume is indispensable if the black church is to offer any prophetic hope for the hip-hop generation. On Sekou’s account, “if the black church is to remain relevant in the 21st century it must ponder its relationship to Hip Hop, youth activism, and young people.”⁶³

It is no surprise then that Rev. Sekou’s sense of vocational identity as an “organic intellectual” in the prophetic black church tradition along with his commitment to keeping track of the humanity of despised black youth would lead him to the streets of Ferguson, Missouri in response to the fatal police shooting of unarmed teenager, Michael Brown. In an interview with Medium.com, Rev. Sekou describes his and other local clergy’s decision to show up in support of protest activities lead by youth affiliated with organizations such as “Lost Voices, Hands Up United and Millennial

Activists United.”⁶⁴ For Sekou, showing up for and with these young people in front of the Ferguson police station was *both* an act of political solidarity and religious witness. According to Sekou, “Clergy knelt and prayed in front of a garrison of police repenting for our silence and supporting the young folks who we followed to the space of resistance and place of injustice.”⁶⁵ Sekou goes on to describe the ways that the public performance of ritual created a space of religious resistance that invited the further participation of black youth. Sekou recalled, “After our spontaneous prayer meeting, young folks asked us to step aside as they stood in the middle of the street willing to risk arrest.”⁶⁶

In this context of heightened police presence, surveillance, and repression these acts of prayerful protest were met by a “line of police wielding long brown wooden batons and donning riot gear [who] marched lock step toward the young folks in the street.”⁶⁷ In the midst of this politically-charged and potentially dangerous situation, Rev. Sekou’s description of his subsequent actions suggests the necessity of rethinking our understanding of religious ritual, even “ecstatic” worship, as an act of resistance. Sekou, and the other clergypersons’ acts raise important questions about notions of sacred space. For instance, these ritualized acts of resistance demonstrate the ways that these religious activists attempted to reclaim sites of injustice and violence as sacred space.⁶⁸

This account also further illuminates the significance of ritual actions in light of Harris’ and Holmes’ arguments for the ways that religious culture serves political purposes in public spaces, expanding the possibilities of ritual practices beyond formal institutional contexts. For instance, Sekou uses the language of ecstatic worship, or “spirit-possession” in the African Diasporic tradition, to describe his religious intervention on behalf of criminalized black youth. Here is Sekou:

Something got a hold of me. I darted out in between the youth activists and advancing police. I knelt and prayed. I was promptly surrounded by police, snatched up and placed in a blood stained police van but the youth would not back down.⁶⁹

I argue that Sekou’s intervention on behalf of black youth is theoretically informed by an understanding of the ways that moral panic shapes public responses—white and black—to young people constructed as morally deviant and socially dangerous. For Sekou, the strategic performance of public prayer and other forms of religious ritual is linked to a larger struggle of socio-political and cultural resistance against the dehumanization of black youth in dominant regimes of racial representation. Thus, these ritual actions not only serve political purposes but also aim to resignify the identities of despised black youth as sacred and worthy of humane treatment. This aim is accomplished, in part, by attempting to reveal the divine image as subversively mediated through the reviled bodies of poor black urban youth, who have been dismissed by both dominant white culture and middle-class African Americans committed to more traditional politics of respectability.⁷⁰

During a panel discussion on Ferguson, Rev. Sekou continued to deploy religious culture for political purposes by offering a provocative counter-testimony to disrupt dominant narratives concerning the “deviance” of black youth. As Sekou recalls, after strategically positioning his

praying body between black youth and the police, the youth surrounded the police van and demanded his release. Sekou then levels a sermonic critique of the devaluation of black youth, intoning “[these are] the children we mock, the ones we make fun of for sagging their pants and wearing tattoos and for listening to hip hop...these are the people who may be America’s salvation.”⁷¹ Sekou then presses a more provocative theological claim, “And so it is in their faces that God has broken into history...poor, black, working-class youth have been the very image of the divine in public space, and so we must celebrate them.”⁷²

In Sekou’s sermonic “celebration” of youth that both whites and black elites have typically mocked, he argues for “a thorough doing away with and shattering of a respectability politic [sic] that will save black people.” Rev. Sekou, the activist-preacher argues, “Let us be clear that Michael Brown had four parents—two mommas and two daddies—who loved him- on his way to see his grandparents . So part of an extended... family that was intergenerational, but yet he was still murdered...”⁷³ In this regard, Sekou rejects a politics of respectability—that has advanced a representational politics that presents black people as moral, dignified, and worthy of assimilation into dominant culture—as an inadequate response to persistent racial injustice. As Tommy Lott has argued, “According to bootstrap uplift, the role of the black middle class in the elevation of the black urban poor is to transmit mainstream culture to them. This suggests, of course that America’s capitalist social order need not be changed and that the problems of the black urban poor are a result of their own cultural maladaptation.”⁷⁴ For Sekou, however, “nothing other than our resistance will save us inside of the American empire.”⁷⁵ Such counter-testimonies work to disrupt dominant narratives of the social deviance of black youth which circulate throughout popular culture and public discourse, and inform public policy as well as police tactics. By celebrating those whom others have mocked, Sekou resists their dehumanization and works toward the re-presentation of these working-class and poor black youth as sacred, as deserving of equal protection and human treatment under the law.

Rev. Sekou’s insistence upon the inadequacy of black respectability politics is simultaneously linked to what he and Cornel West have described as an “open hostility between many from a younger generation of activists and elites of the traditional civil rights, religious and civic organizations of the Black freedom struggle.”⁷⁶ In a jointly written article, Sekou and West critique the failure of civil rights and religious leaders to understand and adequately support the younger generation of activists in Ferguson, due to the perceived failure of the youths to represent the black respectability politics that governed civil rights activism. With reference to the two most visible activist ministers of the old civil rights guard, West and Sekou write, “...both Rev. Jesse Jackson and Rev. Al Sharpton were booed by young Ferguson activists who found their presence wanting, even self-serving.”⁷⁷

Moreover, Sekou insists that these ministers and other leaders often actively joined in the public condemnation of young black activists in Ferguson. For instance, he writes, “A significant portion of Rev. Al Sharpton’s sermon during Mike Brown’s funeral service was devoted to criticizing a

generation of young blacks, painting them as gun-toting thugs who have ‘ghetto pity parties.’”⁷⁸ As such, Jackson and Sharpton, according to Sekou and West, represent an older generation of black religious leaders who, “Unlike King...have not responded adequately to young Black leadership rooted in the plight of poor blacks.”⁷⁹ Here West and Sekou are worth quoting at length:

By placing the emphasis on respectability politics instead of on the visceral pain and rage so eloquently articulated on the streets of Ferguson, traditional leadership attempted to shame the courageous yet maligned young folks who forced the nation to acknowledge their humanity in [the] face of inhumane treatment by law enforcement.⁸⁰

Despite Sekou’s argument for the revelation of the divine in the faces of despised black youth, however, the brutal realities of black suffering and death along with the increased militarization of police raises the specter of despair. To be sure, in the question and answer period of the “Keep Ferguson Alive!” panel, one panelist raised the persistent question of theodicy, especially as it has been raised among those who have become disillusioned by the relentlessness of violence and repression and the apparent absence of (divine) justice for black youth. The panelist described the increasing loss of faith, both religious and political, in the face of continued assaults on the humanity of black youth—both historically and in the more recent cases of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown—and the apparent failure of the judicial system to secure justice. While not intended to address these situations, Barbara Holmes captured much of what was at stake in the panelist’s question when she wrote:

When killers kill with the state as a silent partner, when ‘the killed’ see no end to the progressive annihilation of spirit and soul, both succumb to a spiritual disorder. This spiritual disorder is most often characterized by flight- flight from prayer, from intimate relationships, from silence and the potential to hear a divine blessing or rebuke.⁸¹

In response, Cornel West insists that there is “no theoretical resolution” to such a question, only “hints and guesses.”⁸² For West, however, while there is no theoretical resolution, the response of religious activists and organic intellectuals must be one of resilient and resolved religio-political praxis. In other words, “protect the children, organize the poor...keep resistance and resilience going in the face of the theoretical irresolvability of the problem of theodicy.”⁸³ West concludes his response by insisting, “Grandmama ain’t have no theoretical solution...but she stood tall in the midst of that doubt.”⁸⁴ Therefore, the only legitimate response for West is “bury the dead, protect the children, organize the poor...be true enough to yourself to think critically as you act.”⁸⁵ In this last comment, West affirms the indispensability of “theory” as a mode of critical reflection upon and in the midst of action, while simultaneously acknowledging Hall’s insistence on “its ephemerality, its insubstantiality, how little it registers, how little we’ve been able to change anything or get anybody to do anything.”⁸⁶

Rev. Sekou, agreeing with West that the question of theodicy (or more specifically the theological problem of *black* suffering and death) is theoretically irresolvable, goes further, saying, “in light of the material conditions in which black youth are too-often forced to live and die, ‘God doesn’t

make sense.”⁸⁷ Sekou, however, poses the more humanistic question, “What kind of human being are you going to be in the face of evil?”⁸⁸ For Sekou, this question is answered in part by a deep commitment to religio-political activism informed by deep thinking. Yet, Sekou insists that there is more at stake. For Sekou, it seems that this need for “more” is rooted in a wrestling with Barbara Holmes’ concern that these state-sponsored killings might lead not only to physical death, but also to “spiritual disorder.”⁸⁹ As such, Sekou subsequently asks two related questions. First, “what does social justice look like as a spiritual discipline?” Second, he asks, “[when conceiving of social justice as a spiritual discipline] how do we have joy?”⁹⁰ For Sekou, this notion of maintaining “joy” as a mode of resistance to evil is absolutely crucial *even* in the midst of the absurdities of life, the anguish of theodicy, and the continued denial of justice. Invoking his grandmother’s authority as folk religious and cultural theorist, he insists that black folks must be fortified with the sort of existential resolve bequeathed to him by a worshipping community that insisted (and in so doing, *resisted*), “This joy I have, the world didn’t give it to me and the world can’t take it away.”⁹¹

Refusing to be trapped by rigid dichotomies between worship and activism, however, Sekou argues that there is deep joy to be derived from standing in solidarity with despised black youth, praying and protesting in spaces of resistance and places of injustice. Solidifying an understanding of his ritual action as both an act of worship and an act of political resistance, Sekou uses language reminiscent of the charismatic liturgical tradition of his Church of God in Christ (COGIC) roots, saying, “When I’m in the streets with babies who won’t bow down [to oppression], something happens to me...*a quickening*, if I might deploy a Pentecostal narrative...”⁹² According to Rev. Sekou, the joy of resistance, as a form ritual action (what Barbara Holmes has described in terms of the “joy unspeakable” of black worship), is indispensable for activists encountering the persistent evil perpetuated against black youth. Bereft of such joy, Sekou testifies, activists risk embodying the very evil they seek to resist. Armed with such joy, however, Sekou insists that religious activists are empowered to engage in rituals of resistance as a form of “radical revival,” deployed to undergird the leadership of youth, who are “willing to risk life and limb for the project of freedom.”⁹³

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have examined and attempted to intervene in longstanding debates among black intellectuals on the relationship between black religious worship and political activism. I have demonstrated that accounts of black worship that position these religious practices as antithetical to political activism are reductionistic and fail to acknowledge the complex ways that religious worship has been linked to modes of socio-political resistance. While recent scholarship has challenged these reductionistic accounts, few have moved beyond the Civil Rights era to examine links between worship and the religious activism of the hip-hop generations. Thus, I have argued that Rev. Sekou’s ritual actions in Ferguson and his subsequent theological reflections

upon those actions demonstrate the use of black religious culture (in this case, black worshipping practices) as a strategy for re-humanizing despised black youth who have come of age in the post-Civil Rights era, the era of hip hop.

As such, I argued that Rev. Sekou participates in a long tradition of using religious culture as a means of “resacralizing black bodies.” He expands that tradition beyond Barbara Holmes’ critique of the Black Church’s “time warp” to include the concerns of contemporary black youth who are socially constructed and culturally represented as morally deviant, criminal, beyond redemption and even *deserving* of death. Resisting such socio-cultural representations, Rev. Sekou joins other activist clergy in particular modes and expressions of embodied black religious worship, performed in public spaces, and in solidarity with black youth. Through these acts of worship, Rev. Sekou and other religious activists aim to re-present black youth as invested with human dignity and their bodies as revelations of divine presence. I also argued that against Hall’s “urgency of [black youth] dying in the streets,” Rev. Sekou demonstrates the significance of “theory” for informing religious ritual and/as political resistance. At the same time, however, Sekou’s insistence upon the embodied performance of ritual action as joyful praxis of political resistance in the midst of death-dealing encounters with the absurd, points to Hall’s simultaneous recognition of “the necessary modesty of theory.”⁹⁴

Notes

1 Barbara Holmes, “Worship in the African American Traditions” in *African American Religious Cultures: Volume 2: S-X, Essays* ed. Anthony B. Pinn (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 611.

2 “The Gospel is Not a Neutral Term: An Interview with Rev. Sekou,” <https://medium.com/theology-of-ferguson/the-gospel-is-not-a-neutral-term-an-interview-with-rev-sekou-ae7990e66fe2>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

3 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies” in *Cultural Studies* eds. Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 285.

4 This line of thought is informed by and expands upon the theoretical perspectives developed in R. Marie Griffith’s and Barbara Dianne Savage’s, *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2006), xix.

5 See Cathy J. Cohen, *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

6 Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” 285.

7 This response is in reference to the fatal police shooting of an unarmed black teenager- Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. Of course Rev. Sekou is but one of numerous activist clergy who have been engaged in the protests against unjust policing in Ferguson. By focusing solely upon Rev. Sekou, I am not suggesting that that he is acting alone, or is the most important figure in this movement. Rather, he is representative of a larger movement. At the same time, however, Rev. Sekou has long been active on behalf of black youth and has written extensively about the failure of the Black Church to adequately address issues concerning black youth of the hip-hop generations. As such, I turn to Rev. Sekou’s work as an important site of inquiry.

8 Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," 285.

9 Eddie Glaude and Cornel West, *African American Religious Thought*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), xiii

10 See Victor Anderson's essay "Theorizing African American Religion" in *African American Studies* edited by Jeanette Davidson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). In this essay, Anderson describes two hostile trajectories within African American Religious Studies, one conceived as "theological" and the other as "critical." Anderson argues for an approach to theorizing African American religion that moves beyond these hostilities.

11 Victor Anderson, "Theorizing African American Religion" in *African American Studies* edited by Jeanette R. Davidson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) 274-275.

12 See Orlando Patterson, *Rituals of Blood: Consequence of Slavery in Two American Centuries* (Washington D.C.: Civitas, 1998).

13 "The Gospel is Not a Neutral Term: An Interview with Rev. Sekou," <https://medium.com/theology-of-ferguson/the-gospel-is-not-a-neutral-term-an-interview-with-rev-sekou-ae7990e66fe2>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

14 Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, *Gods, Gays, and Guns: Essays on Religion and the Future of Democracy* (Cambridge: Campbell & Cannon Press, 2011), 36.

15 See W.E.B. DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publishing, 1994), especially, "Of the Faith of the Fathers," 115-126.

16 Barbara Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 14.

17 Marla Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (University of California Press, 2003), xiv.

18 Clarence Taylor, *Black Religious Intellectuals: The Fight for Equality from Jim Crow to the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge Press, 2002), 5.

19 Jonathan Walton, "Black Theology and Birmingham: Revisiting a Conversation on Culture" in *Black Theology: An International Journal*, Nov2009 Vol. 7 Issue 3, p259-281.

20 Frederick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6. It is worth noting that Harris views most black theologians as proponents of the "inspiration theory" of religion over against black social-scientists who advocated an "opiate theory." For Harris, "opiate theories" of black religion insist that black religion is compensatory and substitutes for socio-political action. By contrast, "inspiration theories" argue that black religion has been a primary impetus for engagement in socio-political action as a theological imperative.

21 Griffith and Savage, *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, xv.

22 Savage, *Your Spirit Walks Beside Us*, 14.

23 Griffith and Savage, *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, xvi.

24 *Ibid*, xvii. Savage and Griffith argue that this approach to the study of religion is linked to the theoretical and methodological approaches of cultural studies, post-colonial studies and subaltern studies.

- 25** Anderson, "Theorizing African American Religion," 272.
- 26** Holmes' work should not be understood as an elitist attempt to deny the performativity of black religious expression, but rather an attempt to disrupt an understanding of black worship that bifurcates the discursive and non-discursive expressions of black religion.
- 27** Holmes, "Worship in the African American Traditions," 611.
- 28** Barbara Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 149.
- 29** Harris, *Something Within*, 3-5.
- 30** Frederick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African-American Political Activism*, 134.
- 31** Ibid, 134.
- 32** Ibid, 136.
- 33** Ibid, 134.
- 34** Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, viii
- 35** Sekou, *Gods, Gays, and Guns*, 36
- 36** For an interesting discussion of the political implications of black religious music, see the works of Jon Michael Spencer. Especially his *Protest & Praise: Sacred Music of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). For an extension of this discussion into hip-hop culture, see also, "The Emergency of Black and the Emergence of Rap," a special issue devoted to the religious implications of rap music (1991) in the now defunct journal, edited by Spencer, *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theolomusicology* (Duke University Press).
- 37** Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, v.
- 38** See Michael Brandon McCormack, "Black Churches, Moral Panic, and the Empowerment of Black Youth in the Era of Hip-Hop," in *Churches, Blackness and Contested Multiculturalism: Europe, Africa, and North America*, 251-264.
- 39** Griffith and Savage, *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, xi
- 40** In recent years, a number of scholars have turned to Cultural Studies as a methodological partner for African American religious and theological studies. For a discussion of the uses of Cultural Studies in African American religious studies, see Dwight N. Hopkins' "Introduction" in *Changing Conversations: Cultural Analysis and Religious Reflection* eds. Dwight Hopkins and Sheila Greeve Davaney (New York: Routledge Press, 1996). See also, Jonathan Walton's essay, "Black Theology and Birmingham: Revisiting a Conversation on Culture" in *Black Theology: An International Journal*, Nov2009 Vol. 7 Issue 3, p259-281.
- 41** Stuart Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," 284.
- 42** On this last point, however, Henry Louis Gates acknowledges the potential "paralysis of analysis" resulting from certain trajectories within Cultural Studies. Gates refers to the tendency among some theorists to revel in the ambiguities of culture, calling into question any impulse toward normativity, as "the dilemma of post-modern activism." This emphasis upon self-reflexivity, indeterminacy and perpetual deferral of meaning often undercuts any form of moral or even political claims or action. For a more in depth discussion, see, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Tradition and the Black Atlantic: Critical Theory in the African Diaspora* (New York: Basic Civitas, 2010). See especially his

chapter, "Fade to Black: From Cultural Studies to Cultural Politics." In this chapter, Gates reminds us of Stuart Hall's insistence upon the urgency of admittedly "arbitrary forms of closure" (which remain open to future revision) for the sake of staking out strategic positions and mobilizing for political action. For Hall, this move from Cultural Studies, as a purely theoretical endeavor, to cultural politics as a form of social intervention is all the more dire "against the urgency of people dying in the streets."

43 Stuart Hall, "What is this Black in Black Popular Culture?" in *Representing Blackness: Issues in Film and Video* ed. Valerie Smith (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997). 127-130.

44 Pepi Leistyna, Ed. *Cultural Studies: From Theory to Action* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 9.

45 Kenneth Thompson, *Moral Panics: Key Terms* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 42.

46 Ibid, 42.

47 Robert Beckford, *Jesus Dub: Theology, Music and Social Change* (New York: Routledge, 2006) 46-47.

48 S. Craig Watkins, *Representing: hip hop culture and the production of black cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 1.

49 For further discussion on the relationships between black youth culture and moral panic, see Michael P. Jeffries' *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), especially his chapter, "Parental Advisory: Explicit Lyrics". For a discussion on the relationships between black youth, moral panic, and religion, see Monica Miller's *Religion and Hip Hop* (Routledge Research in Religion, Media and Culture) (New York: Routledge, 2013), especially her chapter "Scapegoats, Boundaries, and Blame: The Civic Face of Hip-Hop Culture," 24-44.

50 Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," 285.

51 Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, *Urban Souls* (Saint Louis: Urban Press, 2001).

52 Sekou, *Urban Souls*, 86.

53 Hall, "Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies," 285.

54 Tommy Lott, *The Invention of Race: Black Culture and the Politics of Representation* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1999), 112.

55 Ibid, 120.

56 Ibid, 120.

57 Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, *Urban Souls* (Saint Louis: Urban Press, 2001), 86.

58 Ibid, 86.

59 Ibid, 85-87.

60 Sekou, *Gods, Gays and Guns*, 50.

61 Ibid, 50.

62 See especially Cohen's chapter, "Gangsta Rap Made Me Do it: Bill Cosby, Don Imus and Black Moral Panics," in *Democracy Remixed: Black Youth and the Future of American Democracy*.

63 Ibid, 51.

64 “The Gospel is Not a Neutral Term: An Interview with Rev. Sekou,” <https://medium.com/theology-of-ferguson/the-gospel-is-not-a-neutral-term-an-interview-with-rev-sekou-ae7990e66fe2>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 In her work on black religious nationalism, Tracey Hucks has argued, for “a theology of the streets” that recognizes the ways that city streets have long served as “a site of resistance, subversion, and social critique” for African Americans. Moreover, for Hucks, “the streets could bear the public grief of a community as well as create a ‘spiritual atmosphere’ with the ability ‘to stir in participants and spectators as well.’” See Tracey E. Hucks, *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012)*, 112.

69 “Keep Ferguson Alive!” <http://new.livestream.com/unionseminary/keepingfergusonalive>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

70 For a discussion of a “politics of respectability,” see Eveylyn Brooks Higgenbotham’s *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). See especially her chapter, “The Politics of Respectability,” 185-230.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Lott, *The Invention of Race*, 126

75 “Keep Ferguson Alive!” <http://new.livestream.com/unionseminary/keepingfergusonalive>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

76 West, Cornel and Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou, “And the Young Ones Shall Lead Them: The Ferguson Rebellion and the Crisis in Black Leadership” in *Ebony Magazine*, October 2, 2014 <http://www.ebony.com/news-views/and-the-young-ones-shall-lead-them-the-ferguson-rebellion-and-the-crisis-in-blac#axzz3R5RY4mvC>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

77 Ibid.

78 Ibid.

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid. Notwithstanding the severe distrust of clergy by many young black activists in Ferguson, resulting from their perceived complicity with repressive law enforcement, West and Sekou name a cadre of progressive religious activists, across generational lines, who have stood and knelt with black youth in an attempt to bear witness to their human dignity and divine possibilities. West and Sekou’s list of ministers include: Rev. Renita Lamkins, Rev. Tommie Pearson, Rev. Nelson Pierce Jr., Rev. Alvin Herring, Rev. Michael McBride, Rev. Dr. Ruby Sales, Rev. Traci Blackman, as well as Anthony Shahid of the Nation of Islam. West and Sekou also name a number of hip-hop artists and activists, community organizers and everyday people who also stood in solidarity with young black protesters in Ferguson.

81 Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 142.

82 “Keep Ferguson Alive!” <http://new.livestream.com/unionseminary/keepingfergusonalive>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

83 Ibid.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid.

86 Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” 285.

87 “Keep Ferguson Alive!” <http://new.livestream.com/unionseminary/keepingfergusonalive>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

88 Ibid.

89 Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable*, 142.

90 “Keep Ferguson Alive!” <http://new.livestream.com/unionseminary/keepingfergusonalive>. Accessed October 30, 2014.

91 Ibid.

92 Ibid.

93 West and Sekou, “And the Young Ones Shall Lead Them”.

94 Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” 285.