

If You Live Right, Heaven Belongs to You – Radical Historicism, Prophetic Pragmatism, and Melancholic Utopianism in Cornel West and Pentecostalism

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Abstract

This essay aims to deepen the consideration of the intersection of West's corpus with Pentecostal critical thought and praxis by Black-descended persons. Focusing on the U.S. context, this article argues for Pentecostalism as an example and exemplar of West's intellectual priorities in at least two areas: radical historicism (or cultural analysis) and prophetic pragmatism (or social commentary). I will rehearse some essential aspects of West's corpus on these two themes, focusing on Prophecy Deliverance! At the same time, this essay will distill these themes through the work of Pentecostal examples and exemplars. I will examine radical historicism or cultural analysis through the work of the late theological ethicist Leonard Lovett. I will probe

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prophetic pragmatism through the life and ministry of Pentecostal leader, the late Bishop Smallwood E. Williams. I conclude by considering perhaps the most challenging point of intersection – melancholic utopianism by returning to the work of Leonard Lovett and turning to constructive theologian and Black feminist/womanist scholar Keri Day.

Introduction

Prophesy Deliverance! remains both relevant and revolutionary 40 years after its initial publication.² In the work, West carries out a great analysis of America and the

² Throughout this article, I will refer to both the most recent 40th-anniversary edition of the book and an older 20th-anniversary edition. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, 20th-anniversary ed (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! 40th Anniversary Expanded Edition: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, Anniversary, Expanded edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022). Please allow me to express my immense gratitude to Dr. Cornel West for his incredible work, which continues to guide, inform, critique, and inspire my emerging scholarship. And I also wish to thank the special editor, Dr. Harold Bennett, for the invitation to contribute.

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modern world through African American life -- and death. To center those who today remain tenuously related to the category of the human in both the current and the American scene is to claim Black life offers a unique and necessary vantage for both diagnosis and possibly remediation of what ails our world. Though West would likely disagree with any assertion that it was providential that he delivered many lectures that helped shape this book from a predominantly Black church -- a Pentecostal church -- I would argue the location of these lectures is not incidental.

At first thought, it may seem that West's progressive Marxist and prophetic Christian resources have little in common with Pentecostalism. There are some scholars of Pentecostalism as practiced by African Americans who are suspicious of the use of Marxist

thought or critical theory.³ But this argument is naïve and belies the realities of the rigor that West argues should be brought to bear on ameliorating the suffering of Black descended and all oppressed peoples. This is to say, in lifting the contingent, self-critical, and reflexive, interdisciplinary, even anti-disciplinary methods and theoretical frameworks, which inform West’s work, what West might call hitting a blue note, or engaging in jazz improvisation is indicative of the type of critical reflection found in what one scholar terms “Afro Pentecostal thought.”⁴

³ Aaron Howard, “Revelation as Revolution: Black Pentecostal Theology as a Means of Radical Social Change,” *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 44 (2016): 37–57. 41

⁴ Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints in Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1996), 118-122

The Indispensability of Pentecostalism to African American Critical Thought

West opens *Prophesy Deliverance!* with a discussion of the various sources of Afro-American Critical thought.⁵ Primary to Black Critical thought for West is the encounter of Black descended people with Christianity, and in particular, evangelical, and pietistic forms of European Protestantism.⁶ Despite foregrounding the encounter with the religion of the slave master, West makes clear the enslaved are forging something unique to

⁵ I will move throughout the article between the terminology of ‘Afro-American,’ West’s term, and my preferred term, ‘Black.’ I take my cue from “Black Critical thought” for a discourse around Blackness, which some scholars argue has emerged and consolidated since West’s landmark text. I believe West anticipates this discourse with his book, and his corpus should be engaged, considering this is the ever-expanding and diasporic discourse on Blackness. See William David Hart, *The Blackness of Black: Key Concepts in Critical Discourse* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020; and “The Blackness of Black: Key Concepts in Critical Discourse,” *Black Theology* 20, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 101–5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2022.2039858>.

⁶ West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 15

themselves, of which Pentecostalism is an example. In a footnote, West states, “black [sic] churches in the United States evolved as independent churches, separate from white control. ... It is no accident that Pentecostalism – the denomination that vigorously promotes the development of indigenous religious leadership free from the control of church bureaucracies – was founded by black [sic] Baptists, principally Rev. W. J. Seymour...”⁷

It will be important to track this relationship that West posits as he develops his ideas about the Black church in relationship to a term he wants to use interchangeably with the Black church – the prophetic Christian tradition. For West, the prophetic Christian tradition, as practiced within the Black church proclaims,

⁷ *Ibid.*, 149 n. 3

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“every individual regardless of class, country, caste, race or sex should have the opportunity to fulfill his or her potentialities.”⁸

The centrality of a Pentecostal impulse remains indispensable for West’s project of analysis and repair. West highlights Bishop Herbert Daughtry and both Daughtry’s House of the Lord Pentecostal Church and the National Black United Front as exemplary of Afro-American revolutionary Christianity.⁹ Given West’s appreciation for Pentecostalism, it seems that scholars of Pentecostalism would pay more attention to West’s insights and approach. Pentecostal Theological ethicist Aaron Howard acknowledges that *Prophecy*

⁸ Ibid., 1

⁹ West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*, 145. This article does not pursue an in-depth analysis of Daughtry or House of the Lord, because he is featured in the opening article in this edition of the JITC by Dr. Albert G. Miller.

Deliverance! is insightful and accurate and that Black theology lacks a social theory and robust analysis of capitalism. Howard, however, is skeptical that West's approach to wed prophetic Christianity with Marxist analysis is the solution.

Howard argues West's use of Marxist thought "overstates the issue," and that even West agrees "the dialectical methodology of Marxists discourages discussions about the ideal society and what ought to be."¹⁰ It may be better to let West speak for himself. In describing the constitutive elements of Black liberation theology, West acknowledges an implicit dialectical method, but one that does not take seriously or engage

¹⁰ Aaron Howard, "Revelation as Revolution: Black Pentecostal Theology as a Means of Radical Social Change," *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 44 (2016): 37–57.

sufficiently with the dialectical approach indicative of the best of Marxism. West says:

The second reason, the one we shall be concerned with in this section, is the failure of black [sic] theologians to talk specifically about the way in which the existing system of production and the social structure relate to black [sic] oppression and exploitation. Without a focusing upon this relationship, it becomes extremely difficult to present an idea of liberation with socioeconomic content. In short, the lack of a clear-cut social theory prevents the emergence of any substantive political program or social vision.¹¹

It is ironic that Howard wants to make Marxist analysis or Critical social theory the issue, when, in concert with West, he would agree that if “inclusion” in a racist capitalist society for the Black middle class is all that Black liberation theologians are seeking, they should

¹¹ West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 111.

drop the word “liberation.”¹² Presumably, Howard wants more than “inclusion” from any Pentecostal analysis and diagnosis of our anti-black society. In lifting the House of the Lord Pentecostal Church, West intimates they exemplify what a Pentecostal critique and remediation might entail. The House of the Lord Church states its mission is:

[T]o apply the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a holistic synthesis of progressive spiritual and social action, including: Personal salvation through Jesus Christ, the filling and indwelling of the Holy Ghost, healing for body and mind, high moral and ethical disciplines, and the return of Jesus Christ. A struggle against all forms of oppression and exploitation, which often is manifested as racism, sexism, and classism. A struggle for

¹² Howard, “Revelation as Revolution,” 41 n17; West, *Prophecy Deliverance!*

human rights and self-determination for all people.¹³

West would likely not follow many of Daughtry's Black nationalist commitments.¹⁴ But given that he invoked Daughtry, a Pentecostal, as an exemplar of Afro-American revolutionary Christianity, it would seem there is something we can examine in how Pentecostalism and West dialectically engage one another.

Radical Historiography – Recovering Black Antecedents, Unmasking Relationships of Domination

¹³ “Our Mission,” The House of the Lord Churches, accessed January 1, 2023, <https://www.holc.org/our-faith/our-mission/>.

¹⁴ See Herbert D. Sr. Daughtry, *No Monopoly on Suffering: Blacks and Jews in Crown Heights* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1997); Herbert D. Sr. Daughtry, *My Beloved Community: Sermons, Speeches, and Lectures*, 1st ed (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001). Importantly, West wrote a foreword for *No Monopoly on Suffering*.

The Marxist approach to history, according to West, is an account of stages of transition in human societies. The Marxist approach historically accounts for these transitions in societies through their systems of production, where people produce whatever is needed for survival. Conflicts in any society over these modes of production are drivers of social changes, and historical transitions. Moreover, these conflicts in societies give rise to classes of people in their relationship to modes of production, but these classes are impermanent, rooted in socioeconomic realities. History is driven by this framework, and thus, by class struggles. Capitalism is a particular historical epoch within this framework, where owners of production seek to maximize profit, whereas producers, or laborers, as in other historical periods, seek

to maintain their survival.¹⁵ The issue immediately arises that such explanatory frameworks leave little room for the idea of God, or the social practices of communities of faith, such as Pentecostalism. Hence Howard's apprehension. I think before examining how Pentecostals have in fact embraced radical historiography, West's overview of this challenge would be enhanced by consulting one of his important works on Marxism.

In *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, West seeks to elaborate on why Marxist approaches to history are so important to his prophetic Christian commitments.¹⁶ West acknowledges there are "irreconcilable differences" between Marxism and even

¹⁵ West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 107-108.

¹⁶ Cornel West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 1991).

prophetic Christianity.¹⁷ West even says, “I am a non-Marxist socialist,” but nevertheless sees Marxist theory as indispensable for his work as a cultural critic, trained in philosophy who affirms himself as a prophetic Christian. West is committed to Marxist theoretically informed historiography, not only against Christian theologians, but against secular social scientists and historians. For West, Marxist theory is comprised of two fundamental streams:

[H]istorically specific accounts of structures such as modes of production, state apparatuses and bureaucracies, and socially detailed analyses of how such structures shape and are shaped by cultural agents. These pillars require that one’s understanding of history, society, and culture highlight latent and manifest multifarious human struggle for identity, power, status and resources. More pointedly, it demands that one bite the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, *Ethical Dimensions*, xxvii

explanatory bullet and give analytical priority to specific forms of struggle over others.¹⁸

For West, a radical historiography is not just to account for structures of power and domination, but for attending to the Black social practices that refuse and resist the all-encompassing thrust of domination. Hence, radical historiography is necessary for accounting for Black religion. Like Marxist theory, Black theologians, according to West negate White interpretations – in this case, of the Bible and the Gospel. Black theologians preserve truths they understand to be in the Bible, often through the historical experience of Black people and

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiii

transform past understanding of the Bible and the Gospel into new ones for present circumstances and challenges.¹⁹

The tasks of the Black theologian, articulated by West, seems well suited to describe the work of the late Black Pentecostal theological ethicist Leonard Lovett. Lovett was one of the earliest Pentecostals in the U.S. to earn a Ph.D. in Religion, completing his dissertation in 1979 at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.²⁰ In reflecting on his intellectual journey a few years before his death, Lovett suggests that it was his encounter with

¹⁹ West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 109.

²⁰ Leonard Lovett served as the Founding Dean of the Charles H. Mason Theological Seminary (1970-1974) at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. See his “Black Holiness-Pentecostalism: Implications for Ethics and Social Transformation.” (Ph.D., Atlanta, GA, Emory University), accessed October 30, 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/302945390/citation/B7AEF9D57FE242BBPQ/1>.

Marxist theoretical approaches that fundamentally shaped his work.

Lovett recounts enrolling at the Bryn Mawr Graduate School of Social Research as a fellow in community organization.²¹ At Bryn Mawr, Lovett encountered both radical historicism and Critical social theory. Specifically, Lovett cites historian Hebert Aptheker, a well-known Marxist historian, “who articulated a provocative analysis of the African slave trade.”²² Even more importantly, Lovett cites the work of

²¹ Leonard Lovett, “Ethics in a Prophetic Mode; Reflections of an Afro-Pentecostal Radical,” 153-165, in Amos Yong and Estrelida Y. Alexander, eds., *Afro-Pentecostalism: Black Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity in History and Culture* (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2012), 156.

²² Lovett, “Ethics,” 156. Lovett cites Herbert Aptheker, *American Slave Revolts* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1943); and Herbert Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York, NY: Citadel Press, 1951).

W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois is a forerunner to Aptheker.²³ A class on social theory, which treated *The Philadelphia Negro*, introduced Du Bois to Lovett.²⁴ “My serious encounter and engagement with the thought of Du Bois,” Lovett reflects, “changed my entire perspective on American history. ... It was Du Bois’s writing that assisted me in exploding the Eurocentric lies about people of African descent.”²⁵

²³ See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd ed (Chapel Hill, N.C: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000). Robinson’s chapter “Historiography and the Black Radical Tradition” is a study of the work of Du Bois.

²⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, Publications of the University of Pennsylvania. Series in Political Economy and Public Law, No. 14. (Millwood, NY: Kraus-Thomson Organization Ltd., 1973).

²⁵ Lovett, “Ethics,” 156-157. In Lovett’s dissertation, he cites Du Bois’s *The Negro Church*. A recent republishing of this 1903 text includes an insightful essay by Black religion scholar Alton Pollard, outlining the significance of this collective study, led by Du Bois, and his enduring theoretical and historiographical work for the study of Black religion. See W. E. B. DuBois, *The Negro Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2011). Lovett also cites W. E. B. Du Bois, *Some Effort of the American Negro for their own Betterment* (Atlanta, GA, Self-Published, 1898).

One of the most important aspects of Lovett's dissertation is a historicization of African antecedents to contemporary Black holiness Pentecostalism.²⁶ Lovett writes:

A prevailing criticism of the Black holiness-pentecostal movement is that it, for the most part, reflects a general cultural retreat from an ethical and/or theological interpretation of Christian faith and social action to a privatized ecstatic form of religious behavior usually characterized by various forms of neuroses, often resulting in a kind of religious experience without ethical content.²⁷

Lovett attempted to confront cultural deprivation theories of Black sociality and practice by asserting performative practices of enslaved Africans in America

²⁶ Lovett, "Black holiness-Pentecostalism," 2 (Abstract)

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2 (Introduction)

had ontological and epistemological significance. Lovett argued that where there was Black autonomy on plantations – that is religious performances and appropriation of Christianity not mediated by plantation owners, for example the appointment of a plantation approved preacher, “it became apparent that the worship style and form of emotional expression of enslaved Africans would parallel those forms which were distinctively African in nature.”²⁸

²⁸ Lovett, “Black holiness-Pentecostalism,” 25. Much of the chapter on African antecedents does two things. It draws upon the very best literature available at the time, for example Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, [1st ed.], C. Eric Lincoln Series on Black Religion (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1972); Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, 1st Vintage books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Lynne Fauley Emery, *Black Dance in the United States from 1619 to 1970.*, [1st ed. (Palo Alto, Calif: National Press Books, 1972). Lovett also takes sides in the famous debate between sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits on Africans in North America retaining forms and meanings of an African cultural past. See E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*. (New York:

Lovett called this process of parallelism “indigenization,” and he frames this phenomenon in terms of call and response.

The element of call and response, a commonly identified “Africanism” can readily be discerned in the common ritual of Black folk-style worship among Black holiness-pentecostals. This notion of can be identified in the preaching, testifying, shouting and singing, of adherents. The values attached to each component of Black folk-style worship are personal, unique and highly cherished within the tradition.²⁹

I cannot help but think of the contemporary work of Ashon Crawley, when considering what Lovett sketches. Crawley would disagree with the attempt to reconcile the

Schocken Books, 1964); Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1941).

²⁹ Ibid,” 30-31.

tradition, the radical history of Black people making their own spaces, their own faith, with the theological demands of (White) normativity. In his pathbreaking book *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, Crawley argues that blackness is “one ... disruption to epistemology, the theology-philosophy, that produces a world, a set of protocols, wherein black flesh cannot easily breathe.”³⁰

Crawley’s entire book, and a follow-up text, *The Lonely Letters*, are extended meditations on such things as ‘Shouting,’ ‘Noise,’ and ‘Tongues,’ through the material practices and sociality (call and response) he marks as

³⁰ Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*, 1st ed (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2016). 3

Blackpentecostalism.³¹ Crawley, though he never cites Lovett, is indebted to Lovett, by returning to the impossible challenge to render a radical history of Black practice, a valued tradition, legible over against theology, which by discursive necessity, considers such practices irrational and discardable. Crawley turns to a reading of Marx's famous essay "On the Jewish Question," to think about this problem.

The refusal to perform religiosity in order to gain political freedom is a ruse. One would need to leave behind their primitivity, always interarticulated with a backward superstition and cultic behavior, in order to be secular and, thus, enlightened. But Marx demonstrates how this leaving-behind is no emancipatory process at all but a new submission that radically buttresses the inequitable

³¹ Ashon T. Crawley, *The Lonely Letters* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020).

distribution of power that the state needs for its ongoing operation.³²

From here, Crawley turns to the specifically Blackpentecostal performance, to consider how the field of aesthetics values theory over practice and considers what Crawley studies as excess, discardable, not a place or space of thought. This performance, which “gathers and disperses noise,” and “is excess, is the Blackpentecostal aesthetic.” Crawley says, “song during Testimony service, praise during Tarrying,” what Lovett calls indigenization, resists the split between practice and theory. In fact, indigenization may be read as a/theological, Crawley’s term, as a refusal and resistance of theological (read: rational, ethical) distinction at the

³² Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*, 158-159.

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expense of discarding the very practices, which are the source for life and breath under the constant threat of death. Crawley's claim contrasts with Walter Hollenweger, who argues for a "theologically responsible syncretism," which ultimately means normative critique and subordination of Black practice.³³

Writing 20 years later, Christian ethicist Cheryl J. Sanders contends that that Black holiness Pentecostalism is a "reform movement that seeks to bring its standards of worship, personality morality, and social concern into conformity with a biblical hermeneutic of holiness and spiritual empowerment."³⁴ One of the primary reasons Sanders could make this claim is due to the wedding of

³³ Walter J. Hollenweger, *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005). 132-141. This is a chapter entitled "A Plea for a Theologically Responsible Syncretism."

³⁴ Sanders, *Saints in Exile*, 5

theory and praxis in the ministries and writings of several Pentecostals who happen to be Oneness. The late Bishop Smallwood E. Williams is a figure who once described his pastoral, political and intellectual work as “pragmatic Pentecostalism,” a term I argue resonates with Cornel West’s own “prophetic pragmatism.” It is that intersection to which the article now turns.

**Prophetic Pragmatism and Pragmatic
Pentecostalism: Social Theory, Political Engagement
and Public Critique**

The late Bishop Smallwood E. Williams once described his ministry as “pragmatic Pentecostalism.” In so doing, Williams marks this ethical dimension, and the type of prophetic pragmatism West argues for in *Prophesy Deliverance!* and elsewhere. Before preceding to examine

the work of Williams, let me unpack West's notion of prophetic pragmatism.

In a wide-ranging interview entitled "The Indispensability Yet Insufficiency of Marxist Theory," West attempts to situate Marx as a democratic thinker. For West, Marx defines communism as "a struggle for democracy," and West understands this reading of Marx as highlighting the ethical dimension of Marx. This ethical reading of Marx unmasks a religious dimension that remains in Marx critical and empirical work to change society. It is something that West marks as a "religious residue." Another way to read the religious residue in Marx, by way of West, is to understand democratic politics articulated by Critical social theory as nevertheless insufficient due to problems of race. West states that in Europe, and later America you have

“*democratic* institutions, but of course there are significant racial ... constraints on those democratic practices.”³⁵ These racial, and other, constraints on democratic practices are an area of critique that West highlights through what he calls the prophetic.

West articulates the prophetic through a social analysis of empirical conditions, with language that would resonate both with Marxist thought and Critical social theory. “Prophetic pragmatism purports to be not only an oppositional cultural criticism, but also a material force for individuality and democracy. By “material force” I simply mean a practice that has some potency and effect

³⁵ Cornel West. “The Indispensability Yet Insufficiency of Marxist Theory,” *The Cornel West Reader*. (New York, NY: Civitas Books, 2000). 213-230.

or makes a difference in the world.”³⁶ But where he would seem to radically break with many strains of Marxist thought is his explicit appeal to the Jewish-Christian traditions of the prophet as the figure to exemplify the critical philosophy and praxis he articulates. West speaks to religion, the Christian religion (in an Afro-Protestant form) as existentially relevant for him. And here is where his social analysis begins to highlight Black suffering, without an appeal to some essential or metaphysical conception of race.

On the political level, the culture of the wretched of the earth is deeply religious. To be in solidarity with them requires not only an acknowledgement of what they are up against, but also an appreciation of how they cope with their situation. This appreciation does not require that one be religious; but if

³⁶ Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*. 1st ed. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989). 232.

one is religious one has wider access into their life-worlds. ... Yet, since the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Europe, most of the progressive energies among the intelligentsia have shunned religious channels ... Those of us who remain in these religious channels see clearly just how myopic such an antireligious strategy is ... these forces were (and are) often led by prophetic figures of the black[sic] Christian tradition. To be a part of the black freedom movement is to rub elbows with some prophetic black [sic] preachers and parishioners. And to be a part of the forces of progress in America is to rub up against some of these black [sic] freedom fighters.³⁷

West's critique of the U.S. foregrounds African Americans, and he claims his social and empirical analysis of material conditions justifies the privileging of religion.

³⁷ West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, 233-34.

One of the greatest barriers to Pentecostal engagement with West is that scholars and Black practitioners of Pentecostalism often do not foreground Black suffering in accounts of Pentecostalism. For many who identify as Pentecostal, the primary witness of Pentecost is scriptural – that devout Jews from all the known world gathered in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. And further, that 120 early followers of Jesus of Nazareth were in an upper room and claimed to be filled with the Holy Spirit. For people who believe this is all that there is to the story, those persons emphasize the speaking in tongues that took place in Jerusalem and nearly 2,000 years later at Azusa Street in Los Angeles.

There is more to the story. Practitioner testimonies and critical accounts of early Pentecostalism in the U.S. generally acknowledge that Blacks and Whites, by their

very presence together, challenged the prevailing patriarchy and White supremacy of their day.³⁸ However, little or no attention would be given doctrinally, conceptually, and hence theologically, to the meaning of this accident of history – the inbreaking of shared divine language made known in the breaking down of politically articulated, ordered and maintained divisions of human being on the basis of race, gender and sexuality. One exception to this scholarly discourse is the practitioner, Bishop Smallwood Edmond Williams, founder of the Bibleway Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ, Worldwide, in 1927 in Washington, DC.

³⁸ For a standard acknowledgement that doesn't necessarily build upon this is Steven Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

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Williams was born in 1907 one year after Azusa began and died in 1991. Williams broke away from a classical, predominantly Black Pentecostal denomination and established the Bibleway Churches of Our Lord Jesus Christ Worldwide (BWWW). Williams was a significant civil rights leader in Washington, D.C., where he pastored, and even served as president of the branch of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the nation's capital.

In 1970, Williams published a book of sermons after the civil rights movement, capturing four decades of ministry. In that book, he frames an identity of pragmatic Pentecostalism. "The sermons in this volume have the prophetic and contemporary twentieth century historical backdrop of racial injustices, social inequities, moral crises, and apostasy." The motivation for Williams's

preaching is his deep concern for “disinherited” African-Americans, which he compares to what the “Hebrew Prophets of social justice had for their people. He had sermons on typical, expected Pentecostal themes such as “The Highway of Holiness,” and “The Availability of the Holy Ghost.”³⁹

But Williams included sermons attacking race prejudice, for example his 1949 sermon, “Hitler Still Lives,” where he boldly declared, “Hitler is alive today. ... The Hitler philosophy of racial injustices, minority oppression, are demonstrated in our American life.”⁴⁰ Recent scholarship has argued Hitler was in fact inspired by American Jim Crow laws to fashion his racist and

³⁹ Smallwood Edmond Williams, *Significant Sermons* (Washington, D.C.: Bibleway Church, 1970).

⁴⁰ Williams, *Significant Sermons*, 57.

genocidal state apparatus.⁴¹ This makes Williams's argument even more remarkable, and more courageous given his historical context. Williams concedes his preaching may not be what all Pentecostals want to hear or read.

I am quite aware that all Pentecostal people are not inclined to appreciate pragmatic preaching which deals with contemporary problems as many prefer doctrinal preaching; however, God has honored my ministry. I am a soul winner. ... Thousands have been filled with the Holy Ghost and healed physically and spiritually.⁴²

The contrast that Williams articulates is striking. Pragmatic preaching is not simply, solely, or even primarily doctrinal preaching. But it has a relationship to

⁴¹ James Q. Whitman, *Hitler's American Model: The United States and the Making of Nazi Race Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017).

⁴² Williams, *Significant Sermons*, 8.

doctrinal preaching. Williams says he has had people, as Pentecostals are apt to say, “saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost,” he has had people “healed, delivered and set free,” and yet he has done something that has made some Pentecostals uncomfortable.

In his later autobiography, Williams would again seamlessly weave social justice and spirituality together, this time framed as the “full gospel.”

There is a valid call to preach the “full” Gospel, spiritually, socially and economically. Preaching this type of Gospel took me to street corners, schoolhouses and the White House; into legislatures, political conventions, the lobbies of big business groups, and contact with hospitals and jails. Like the prophet Ezekiel ministering to the Hebrew people, I identified with the struggles and aspirations of my people. God is still telling the pharaohs of this century, through His ministers, “Let My People Go!” Radio, television, street-demonstrations, religious

fastings, prayer: These were all part of preaching a full Gospel.⁴³

While there are a few references to Smallwood E. Williams in mainly historical or social scientific studies, to date, he is only significantly profiled in a single book.⁴⁴ Cornel West, Leonard Lovett, and Smallwood E. Williams all share similarities – deeply indebted to the magisterial work of Du Bois, forged in the fires of the civil rights movement, committed to social justice.

For Williams, the ability to translate Pentecostal spirituality into prophetic and pragmatic social witness means a critical engagement with the word of scripture

⁴³ Williams, *This Is My Story*, 89.

⁴⁴ Williams is profiled in Clarence Taylor, *Black Religious Intellectuals: The Fight for Equality from Jim Crow to the 21st Century*, 1st ed (New York: Routledge, 2002).

and with the world. Williams briefly studied at the Howard University School of Religion. Howard University, according to Dorrien, was one of the central hubs of the Black social gospel. While Williams apparently does not qualify for participation in any of the four categories, Dorrien notes that the social gospel was essentially ‘evangelical.’⁴⁵ Williams was nonetheless mentored by several persons who are central to Dorrien’s argument. In his autobiography, Williams specifically mentions Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays, who would have been the Dean of the School of Religion and would go on to become president of Morehouse College; Dr. Moredcai Johnson, who was president of Howard and Dr. Howard Thurman.

⁴⁵ Gary Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 30.

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Williams specifically seems attracted to the relationship between mysticism and social action – writing at length about Thurman’s experience in India, as well as his several books. Williams would consider Johnson a lifelong advisor, seeking the president’s counsel when he considered fighting school segregation in Washington in the 1950s. Beyond his training at Howard, Williams cited theological influences as diverse Quaker Rufus M. Jones and Methodist Bishop, theologian and missionary E. Stanley Jones.⁴⁶ Williams seemed to move among worlds, though anchored in his Pentecostalism. Taylor says that while Williams was rooted in African American folk religion and theology and higher education that “Pentecostal beliefs helped

⁴⁶ Williams, *This is My Story*, 52-55, 107.

Williams to demystify whiteness and deracialize a society that racialized humanity.”⁴⁷

Melancholic Utopianism – Praying Maternals Seeking the Spirit of a Social Order Not Yet Born

In this article, I have attempted to demonstrate not only the indispensability of Pentecostalism for West’s construction of African American Critical thought, but how Pentecostal praxis and critical interpretation itself has been shaped by West’s own commitments to radical historicism via cultural analysis, and prophetic pragmatism via social analysis and political activism. What should we make of melancholic utopianism, or what West says in the 40th anniversary edition of his landmark text, “that the blues is the raw material of hope”?⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Taylor, *Black Religious Intellectuals*, 53

⁴⁸ West, *Prophesy Deliverance! (40th)*, xvi.

In West's attempt to synthesize the best of prophetic Black Christianity with progressive Marxism, he struggles to reconcile the critiques of both on the inadequacies of their labor. In the case of prophetic Black Christianity, it is its impotency because it locates "ultimate power in a transcendent God who seems to work most effectively beyond history rather than in history."⁴⁹ In the case of progressive Marxism, it is its "naïve notions of Promethean possibilities of persons."⁵⁰ Whether it is the potency of God, or the human possibility of Prometheus, both conjure gendered realities that might help to explain West's melancholia.⁵¹ West's now deeply

⁴⁹ West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 95.

⁵⁰ West, *Prophesy Deilverance!*, 99.

⁵¹ Here I think about Achille Mbembe's psychoanalytic interpretation of Christianity in Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Studies on the History of Society and Culture; 41 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001). See Chapter 6, "God's Phallus," 212-234. On Prometheus, see Jared Hickman, *Black Prometheus: Race and Radicalism in the Age of Atlantic Slavery* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).

tragicomic sensibilities are echoed in Lovett's incoherent but trenchant enflashed memories of racism over his career.⁵² In some sense, West, Lovett, and Williams are all "race men," and provide an over-representation of cisheteropatriarchal normativity as the horizon of Pentecostal liberation for Black people.⁵³

What may be needed is acknowledging the ungendering violence of Black non-being enacted by new world conquest and African enslavement. This violent ungendering not only foregrounds Black women but offers new possibilities of existence and identity for Black

⁵² In a book review of Lovett's *Kingdom Beyond Color*, Cheryl Sanders describes the work as a "diatribe," which "fails as a systematic social analysis of the problem of race but excels as a passionate autobiographical statement." Cheryl J. Sanders, "Kingdom Beyond Color: Re-Examining the Phenomenon of Racism," *Pneuma* 27, no. 1 (2005): 202–4.

⁵³ See Hazel V. Carby, *Race Men* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

men.⁵⁴ Moving in step with Black feminist Hortense Spillers's configuration of ungendering, but for other productive purposes, political theorist and activist Joy James has the idea of the captive maternal.

Captive Maternals are defined by function and legacy rather than identity. They are gender diverse or agender; their lineage stems from the anti-Blackness intrinsic to US political-economies and the legacy of chattel enslavement, what some call the “afterlives of slavery.” Trauma and grief span generations and centuries; so too do mobilizations, organizing and rebellions against repression and genocide. ... There are various stages of the Captive Maternal: conflicted/celebratory caretaker; protester; movement mobilizer; maroon organizer; war resistor (as in resistance to police surveillance as well as

⁵⁴ See Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

police forces and vigilante violence/terrorism).⁵⁵

Though James has an ungendered notion of the captive maternal, some of her earliest musings on this idea were rooted in the labor of Black women – specifically the activism of Ella Baker and the labor of Black women domestics in the first half of the 20th century.⁵⁶ This is important for the centrality of the figure of the Black woman for understanding both, in Spillers’s words the ‘American grammar’ of White supremacy, and also any otherworldly possibilities for resisting and refusing it. There is a hint of this figure in Lovett’s dissertation:

⁵⁵ Joy James, “The Captive Maternal and Abolitionism,” *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 43 (September 1, 2021): 9–23, <https://doi.org/10.3138/topia-43-002>. 12

⁵⁶ Joy James, “Ella Baker, ‘Black Women’s Work’ and Activist Intellectuals,” *The Black Scholar* 24, no. 4 (September 1994): 8–15, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1994.11413167>

“Pentecostalism and charismatic renewal worldwide is indebted to a small group of Black washerwomen who dared to pray as they hungered for the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁷

At the end of his chapter “Historical Background of the Black Holiness-Pentecostal Movement,” these Black washerwomen provide the radical historiographical and prophetic pragmatist impulse that births this outpouring of Spirit that prefigures a gendered, raced and sexed order of the world undone. I cannot do justice to the immense work done by Black women scholars to situate Black women as central to both Cornel West’s project and Pentecostalism. This work has been done by a Black feminist and Pentecostal constructive theologian, deeply committed to radical historiography, critical social and

⁵⁷ Lovett, “Black holiness-Pentecostalism,” 64.

cultural analysis, prophetic Christianity, and radical democratic political engagement – Keri Day.

Day's work shows an ongoing commitment to the activity of Black women, resisting global structures of white supremacy, racial capitalism and cisheteropatriarchy, and articulating emancipatory possibilities beyond gendered melancholic utopias, but rather Black women's wayward gathering.⁵⁸ Day, in her latest text, *Azusa Reimagined: A Radical Vision of*

⁵⁸ Day's corpus is immense. She is one the most important Black theological thinkers in North America. See Keri Day, *Unfinished Business: Black Women, the Black Church, and the Struggle to Thrive in America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012); Keri Day, *Religious Resistance to Neoliberalism: Womanist and Black Feminist Perspectives*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Keri Day, *Notes of a Native Daughter: Testifying in Theological Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2021); Keri Day, *Azusa Reimagined: A Radical Vision of Religious and Democratic Belonging*, 1st ed (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022). Day is indebted to the extraordinary work of Saidiya Hartman, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

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Religious and Democratic Belonging, brings home all the critical returns and possibilities outlined here. It is in her constructive work where she also incorporates her appreciative critique of West's gendered genealogy of racism in *Prophesy Deliverance!*⁵⁹

Working through her deep commitment to Black feminist and womanist historiography and critical social analysis, Day echoes Joy James's work, centering those Black washerwoman.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ See Keri Day, "A Response to Chapter 2; Reflecting on Modern Racism," in Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! 40th Anniversary Expanded Edition: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity, Anniversary, Expanded edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2022). 137-142. Not only is Day's work the payoff to West, but it is a strong response to vulgar Marxist interpretations of religion that dismiss Black and womanist theology, and discard race for reified class analysis. See Marlon Millner, "Can a Dead Black Theology Be Resurrected as a Pentecostal Theology? A Review Essay of The Rise and Demise of Black Theology," *Pneuma* 30, no. 2 (2008): 291-98, <https://doi.org/10.1163/157007408X346438>.

⁶⁰ Day, *Azusa Reimagined*, see chapter 3, "Black Female Genius," esp. 75-83.

Black women were not mere participants at Azusa; they were central to its founding and shaping. Neely Turner. Lucy Farrow. Julia Hutchins. ... Black women domestics and their leadership of Azusa's religious practices created the very conditions of radical relationality at Azusa, making possible practices of connection, care, joy, and intimacy within this religious community.⁶¹

Thus, it is not only the spatial reconfiguration of a Negro camp meeting⁶², but the fleshly labor⁶³ of the captive

⁶¹ Day, 74. I would want to also acknowledge the “washerwomen” from Martinsville, Virginia, led by Mother Lucy Redd, who invited my grandfather to the foothills of southwest Virginia in 1935 to ‘pastor’ a church (a group, led by Redd and women already meeting). These washerwomen would forge churches up and down the east coast, especially in larger northeastern cities, allowing my grandfather to send men to pastor from a very small town in the south.

⁶² On the conceptual significance of the ‘Negro camp meeting,’ see Marlon Millner, “Dis/Parity: Blackness and the (Im)Possibility of a Pentecostal (Political) Theology,” *Pneuma* 44, no. 3–4 (December 20, 2022): 415–41, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700747-bja10075>

⁶³ Judith Casselberry’s rich deployment of the concept of ‘labor’ to examine the lives of contemporary Pentecostal Black women is immensely useful here. Judith Casselberry, *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2017). See Marlon Millner, “The

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maternal that offers the social analysis needed in this moment to provide resources for struggle and resilience in the ongoing onslaught of anti-Blackness.

Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism,” *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 39, no. 4 (December 2017): 568–71, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15700747-03904013>

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