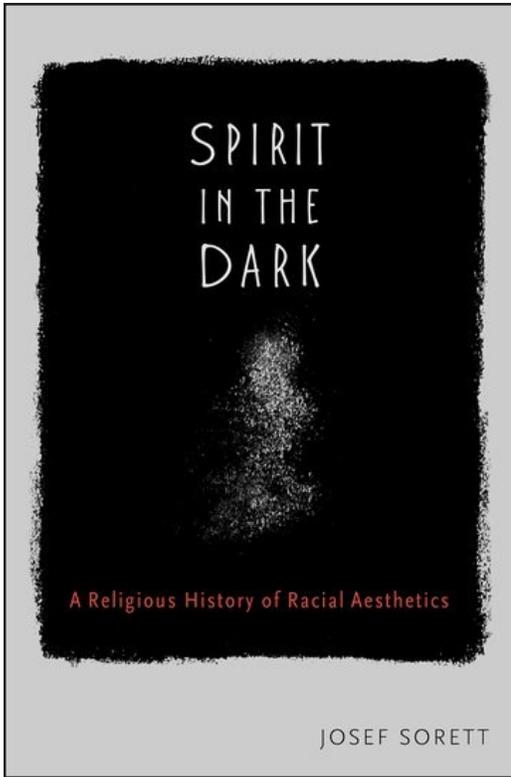


NEW FROM OXFORD

# SPIRIT IN THE DARK

## A RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF RACIAL AESTHETICS

By Josef Sorett



**September 2016**

312 pages

Hardcover \$34.95 **\$24.47**

978-0-19-984493-7

**M**ost of the major black literary and cultural movements of the twentieth century have been understood and interpreted as secular, secularizing and, at times, profane. In this book, Josef Sorett demonstrates that religion was actually a formidable force within these movements, animating and organizing African American literary visions throughout the years between the New Negro Renaissance of the 1920s and the Black Arts movement of the 1960s. Sorett unveils the contours of a literary history that remained preoccupied with religion even as it was typically understood by authors, readers, and critics alike to be modern and, therefore, secular.

*Spirit in the Dark* offers an account of the ways in which religion, especially Afro-Protestantism, remained pivotal to the ideas and aspirations of African American literature across much of the twentieth century. From the dawn of the New Negro Renaissance until the ascendance of the Black Arts movement, black writers developed a spiritual grammar for discussing race and art by drawing on terms such as "church" and "spirit" that were part of the landscape and lexicon of American religious history. Sorett demonstrates that religion and spirituality have been key categories for identifying and interpreting what was (or was not) perceived to constitute or contribute to black literature and culture. By examining figures and movements that have typically been cast as "secular," he offers theoretical insights that trouble the boundaries of what counts as "sacred" in scholarship on African American religion and culture. Ultimately, *Spirit in the Dark* reveals religion to be an essential ingredient, albeit one that was always questioned and contested, in the forging of an African American literary tradition.

### Features

- Offers a religious history of texts, writers and intellectuals typically taken to be secular
- Reveals a religious impulse at the center of the African American literary imagination
- Provides an introduction to African American religion and literature

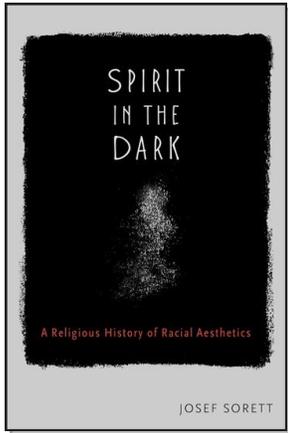
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**Josef Sorett** is Associate Professor of Religion and African-American Studies at Columbia University, where he also directs the Center for African-American Religion, Sexual Politics and Social Justice.

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## Advance Praise for *Spirit in the Dark*

"*Spirit in the Dark* is a finely honed compendium of black American writers and the breadth of their religious influences. That black intellectuals and artists were also sometimes dogmatic religious adherents, eclectic spiritualists, and irrepressible agnostics is not an unknown observation, but what these identifications meant for modern black expressive culture has gone mostly unsaid. Until now. A richly historical study, *Spirit in the Dark* is a valuable resource indeed."

—Maurice Wallace, English and Carter G. Woodson Institute for African-American and African Studies, University of Virginia

"An exciting and innovative intervention that deftly melds African American religious and cultural studies."

—Barbara D. Savage, author of *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion*

"In this magisterial book, Josef Sorett takes us into those black literary spaces that have heretofore been described as secular and reveals how those who reside therein imagine the beautiful in light of the religious. From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, Sorett pushes the boundaries of our understanding of the workings of the 'spirit' and, in doing so, unsettles our understanding of black religion and literature. This SPIRIT moves in this book. It is a must read!"

—Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., William S. Tod Professor of Religion and African American Studies, Princeton University

"Even at their most assertively secular, black expressive arts over the last century have riffed on Afro-Protestant church structures that they in turn attenuate, revise, and sustain. In this venturesome book Josef Sorett traces the 'celebratory ambivalence' that animates and infuses African-American cultural production from the Great Migration to the present. *Spirit in the Dark* is the best single-volume work I know of on the arts and fictions of Afro-Protestant modernity."

—Tracy Fessenden, author of *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*

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