

A Fantastic Church? Literature, Politics, and the Afterlives of Afro-Protestantism

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Last year, by all counts, featured a flourishing of black literature and artistic expression. It was a year in which a relatively long list of black writers—Elizabeth Alexander (2015), Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015), Gregory Pardlo (2014), and Claudia Rankine (2014) among them—received some of the highest of honors. Additionally, in a *New York Times Magazine* essay about the editor Chris Jackson, at least one critic observed that a new “black literary movement” was under way (Cunningham 2016). Noticing that within these broader literary developments many of the new books were autobiographical, Princeton professor Imani Perry (2016) astutely dubbed 2015 the “year of black memoir.” Given all of the fanfare, some might even be tempted to think of 2015 as context for the newest black literary renaissance (Gates 1994).

At the same time, the past couple of years were, undisputedly, a moment in which the United States and the world witnessed an incredible resurgence of black protest politics. With the deaths of Sandra Bland, Rekia Boyd, Eric Garner, Laquan McDonald, and Trayvon Martin, to name just a few, the contradictions of the Obama era came into clear focus. Indeed, the bitter distance between the hope attached to a black presidency and the despair occasioned by a series of hypervisible black deaths helped produce #BlackLivesMatter. Coupled with (and in stark contrast to) the wave of black literary accolades, this new surge in social protest helped make the value and meaning of black lives a subject of incredible interest to Americans of all colors.

Out of the crowded room of awardees, Coates surfaced as singular in his public significance, both for a liberal white audience and for a new generation of black activists. Coates’s appeal, though, seemed to be not so much a product of any par-

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ticular analytical or literary brilliance. Quite to the contrary, in fact, some argued (Kassel 2015). Instead, the tone of his memoir, *Between the World and Me*, has been received as representative of the times. The text is taken as indicative of the angst, anger, and, ironically, American ambitions of many black youth coming of age today.

Coates's literary powers, in part, are found in affirming the value of black life by chronicling all the ways that black lives have been made to not matter. And a distinctive part of his appeal—that is, as a voice to (if not of) black millennials—is his professed disconnectedness from the church (Coates 2015: 28). His gaze turns from the religious to the brute material fact of the body. Spirit is irrelevant; matter, in the most literal sense, is all that matters. If the image of Michael Brown's lifeless body lying in the street for four hours is what sparked a new social movement, Coates compellingly communicates the meaning of the black (male) body in the affective register of one struggling for dear life to find his breath (Bosman and Goldstein 2014). Absent any metaphysical claims, for Coates the black body itself is *the* sacred text, and he has received a chorus of amens for preaching this gospel of blackness in public.

If the simultaneous celebration of black literature and consumption of black death strikes readers as odd, it shouldn't. Black creativity, it would seem, makes the most sense (at least in the public imagination) when it is affixed to or interpreting racial crisis. The structural arrangements and social effects of white supremacy, otherwise put, provide the preconditions for black literary performance and protest politics alike.

Indeed, the earliest ideas of African American literature, in the final decade of the nineteenth century, emerged during a historical moment that was declared to be the dawn of a "Negro Renaissance" and the "nadir of race relations" at once (Logan 1997; Warren 2012). The lynching of black people was at an all-time high and segregation was endorsed by the nation's highest court. Yet Charles Chesnut, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and other "New Negro" writers were simultaneously achieving a measure of literary fame. In this context, Victoria Earle Matthews (1986) argued before the First Congress of Colored Women that "race literature" would champion "true heroism" and advance "real Christianity."

The long history of African American letters since has been one in which culture has been commonly understood through the prism of (and in service to) race politics. The historian David Levering Lewis (1997: xxiii), for one, once described the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s as a form of "civil rights by copyright." Over the years black cultural expression has appeared to become all the more visible,

to the point of being granted movement status, in moments that have demanded radical protest. Most emblematically, it was the tumultuous 1960s—of protests, public assassinations, and Black Power—that gave us a “Black Arts” movement.

Then again, when has this not been the case? One could say that these are the perpetual conditions of modern black life—of politics pressing hard on the literary and of the arts attempting to lift the veil on the violently real constraints imposed by the fictions of race. This remains true even as one acknowledges the complexities of black writing and the distinctiveness of black politics in the current moment. Yet one might wonder anew today about the merits of this seemingly steady relationship in which race politics appears ever ready to overdetermine black cultural expression (Cunningham 2015).

Clearly, there is no single answer to this query, but one need not search long for contemporary examples of the conundrum. As I was finishing up revisions to this essay, images of Tess Asplund standing face-to-face with members of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) went viral. On May 1, 2016, as the NRM moved in a procession through the streets of Borlänge, Sweden, Asplund jumped in front of a group of white male marchers and, with her right hand tightly clenched, shot her arm straight up in the air in defiance.

The confrontation, ready-made for the Twittersphere, was spontaneously staged by an Afro-Swedish woman with a long record of antiracist activism. In addition to her closely cropped Caesar haircut, on this day she happened to be dressed, fittingly, in a black leather jacket. Asplund’s Black Power pose perfectly iconized the transnational dimensions of this new moment of black protest. In light of the global connections of today’s media networks, and with hip-hop’s rise to become the most popular form of pop culture the world over, hypervisible black bodies have by now become all but normalized. Though the image of Asplund, fist in the air, harks back to the racial iconography of the 1960s, the sight of her raised fist was strangely familiar. After all, a team of Swedish filmmakers released *The Black Power Mixtape, 1967–1975* (dir. Göran Olsson; 2011) just five years earlier, repopularizing the movement’s art and activism around the globe.

Hip-hop and history help explain the power of Asplund’s pose, to be sure, but it also made perfect sense in light of more recent American political memories. After all, #BlackLivesMatter gained so much traction in 2015 that *Time* magazine short-listed the movement for its Person of the Year award and described the moment as one in which the new freedom struggle “blossomed from a protest cry into a genuine political force” (Altman 2015). As the noted scholar and activist Barbara Ransby (2015) observed, this cry of protest was emblematic of the “col-

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lective rage” of black and brown young people entering adulthood during the age of Barack Obama’s presidency. In turn, the Movement for Black Lives, as it is now often named, worked hard to harness their rage as a resource for bending the arc of the universe toward its twenty-first-century vision of racial justice.

If xenophobia is what fueled the ambitions of the NRM in Sweden (and thus created the conditions for Asplund’s counterprotest), similar issues have become increasingly apparent in the United States. Indeed, Donald Trump’s presidential bid has stoked the fires of a racial animus that continues to kindle never too far below the surface of American political discourse (Tesfaye 2016). Yet the rhetoric of the current presidential campaign (and the individual records of each candidate) became a target for #BlackLivesMatter well after protesters had mobilized in response to the wave of police brutality and state-sanctioned violence, among other issues, that were now being caught on video and broadcast around the world. This most recent wave of racial violence was by no means new. Yet the degree to which it made a claim on the public psyche—via representation and constant replay on traditional and new media—was no doubt novel.

On the pages of *Public Culture*, John L. Jackson Jr. (2016) captured well the critical role (and contested terrain) of new media in the current moment. Digital recording technologies have been deployed by both activists and the state to hold the state accountable—to police the police, if you will. And successful use of social media as a resource for organizing has often been noted as distinctive of this new cohort of activists. Yet engaging media to unveil police violence was also essential to the strategies employed during the 1960s. In this view, #BlackLivesMatter is perhaps more an updating of the platform than it is a complete reboot. Though commonly (and proudly) identified as “not your grandfather’s civil-rights movement,” in truth the Movement for Black Lives comprises a bit of the old and the new at once (Cobb 2016).

If the media mechanisms used in contemporary black activism are indicative of the steady evolution of technology, then perhaps the movement’s substantive vision helps to clarify claims for its novelty. #BlackLivesMatter, generally speaking, is known for its public disdain of what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham (1993: 185–230), two decades ago, termed the “politics of respectability.” This disavowal has worked to signal, on the one hand, an alienation from and cynicism toward traditional (read: middle-class) black institutions and their organizing logics and, on the other, a notion of racial justice that embraces class, gender, and sexual difference. Respectability, in short, is eschewed in favor of a black feminist and queer politic.

On each of these matters, #BlackLivesMatter is cast as a radical reimagining

of the black past and, specifically, as a full departure from the “Black Church.” In this regard, Coates and the Movement for Black Lives would seem made for each other, although the latter’s gender and sexual politics and the former’s overtly masculinist vision make for an awkward partnership. Granted, it’s a pairing that strangely resembles the complicated sexual and gender politics of black churches—where models of black women leaders exist in plenty despite professed commitments to a male heteronormative hierarchy—across the long twentieth century. Although access to both the podium and the pulpit is opening up, black literature and protest politics today are not as far removed from the traditions of Afro-Protestantism as they, more often than not, are thought to be.

Between evolving ideals and strategic practices—the quotidian doings and utopian dreams—that span the twentieth century and current developments in black literature and politics is a much more complicated set of entanglements that animates the breaks and fissures in black social life. In previous generations, black churches provided a space to balance and mediate the tensions that defined black cultural and political life. Over time, literature and politics were understood as diverging trajectories—under the differentiated terms of modern life—for activities that were once contained within the walls of an all-encompassing and first black institution, namely, the Negro Church (Du Bois 2015).

Surprisingly, before (and since) black Christian churches emerged as a singular sociological construct (Savage 2009), the complicated network of local congregations, theological commitments, and political orientations that were located under this banner resembled, in practice, what more recently have been described as the organizing logics of #BlackLivesMatter. Both began as movements defined by decentralized structural arrangements and constituted by an uneven ensemble of local agendas, actors, and organizations.

Black literature was also initially produced in the context of Afro-Protestant publishing houses, but it, too, has become recognized as too complicated and varying to be lumped together under one racial rubric (Foster and Haywood 1995). Complexity and difference are now the rule on all counts. Yet black literature, politics, and religion continue to be corralled together by the lie that is race—and its very real effects. And the same still holds for how we imagine black churches, whether a message of financial prosperity, social conservatism, or prophetic critique is preached from the pulpit on Sundays.

Surprisingly for some, African American clergy—women and men, queer and straight—are playing a significant role in the complex networks of activists and organizations that compose the Movement for Black Lives. Black churches have also played host to many a rally and provided refuge for protesters and solace to

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survivors of racial violence. Yet such facts should not surprise us. They are in keeping with church history. More interesting than the mere presence of Christian churches and preachers in today's black protest politics are, to my mind, the contours of the religious work that has emerged as central to the movement itself.

#BlackLivesMatter has both decentered churches and made a claim for a different kind of church (Sorett 2016). Much has been noted about the "unorthodox" religious backgrounds of the three women who are most often cited as the founders of this leaderless (or leader-full) movement (#BlackLivesMatter Organization 2016). Patrisse Cullors's biography includes a long-standing interest in "indigenous spirituality," which eventually led her to become an Ifa practitioner (Farrag 2015). That Alicia Garza is most commonly associated with Marxism casts her as standing in opposition to religious belief of any kind. And Opal Tometi (2016) self-identifies on her website as a "believer and practitioner of liberation theology." In each case, Cullors's, Garza's, and Tometi's respective religious orientations are presented as extensions of a broader set of queer commitments. They refuse to abide by the traditional authority of Christian churches and instead embrace a set of spiritual and social practices that fall outside the bounds of "standard respectability discourses," to borrow the phrasing of Richard Iton (2008), the late scholar of black politics and popular culture. If anything, Iton's notion of a "black fantastic" aptly anticipates the kind of historically grounded, future-oriented, and heterodox fusion of the culture, politics, and spirituality on display in #BlackLivesMatter (*ibid.*: 16–17).

Beyond debunking the myth of the "Black Church," or decrying its respectability politics, churches have provided black people with an institutional base, a space of ecumenical organizing, and a horizon for imagining the terms of black life. In addition to public recognition in America's Protestant order, black churches have constituted a cultural and moral geography that is more expansive than the physical space and place occupied by a church building or the theological claims that are accepted as orthodoxy. Here I am thinking about the kind of cultural practices—which often present as religious, spiritual, and even "churchy"—that are intended to affirm black life and don't necessarily register (or are misread) on the radars of mainstream media, or which remain by design in the shadows of protests staged in public to counter a culture that devalues black life.

For instance, even when deployed in plain sight, social media practices often represent more than a practical effort to organize a specific demonstration. Rather than a form of "hashtag activism" to be decried as superficial and unsubstantial, they are indicative of efforts to create connection, conversation, and community under the inescapable terms of today's hypermediated realities. Rather than an

alternative to or escape from real world connections between human bodies, #BlackLivesMatter helps to illumine how social media and social life are mutually constitutive (Berlatsky 2015).

The names of the lives lost in recent years—more numerous, of course, than those noted in this essay—are now often enumerated via tweets and status updates as acts of witness, blurring the lines between elegy and religious litany. For instance, in the wake of Sandra Bland’s death in a Texas jail cell, #SayHerName became one of the many secondary slogans that followed the original #BlackLivesMatter, which spawned the movement’s moniker. Each hashtag, in effect, is mobilized both to memorialize a life and to inspire further movement. In the case of #SayHerName, it also helped to overtly signal a commitment to gender equality as an organizing principle for a racial justice movement that features (and, in some cases, privileges) black feminist and queer leadership.

Ultimately, in both its substance and form, #BlackLivesMatter strikes me as an effort to reclaim, reconstitute, and reimagine a radical religious tradition associated with (but never to be conflated with) a black church that was birthed in the midst of the struggle for freedom. In the Movement for Black Lives, the work of publicly affirming and sustaining black social life is prioritized alongside transforming the nation-state. Black life itself, in this view, is the sacred prize.

Church, if nothing else, has been and remains a sign of that prize. A literary trope and cultural myth, certainly, and a persistent and powerful one, still. The affective dispositions, institutional structures, and imaginative horizons associated with Afro-Protestantism—that is, the black church—have been quite heterodox over the long haul, harnessing whatever resources were available. Church, as such, has been concerned with making a claim upon the most “mainstream” of American institutions, including the nation-state. However, with a clear sense of the inability of the state to deliver on all that it promises, churches also have been about the business of cultivating the capacity to conceive of a life on terms that don’t neatly map onto established topographies.

This church, an imaginative terrain and a set of institutions, literary and political at once, set its first sights on transforming a system of racial inequality even as it attempted to affirm and sustain the fullness of black lives. It has been oriented, in this way, by a utopian impulse as it were, to imagine black life on a grid of its own, as implausible as that might seem. We know that churches, black and white alike, are products of and participants in modern racial discourses. Yet on another level, blackness itself (under a variety of names) has circulated as a religious discourse—as a veritable conversation within and without, all around and about, the church.

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Black writers have known this all too well, carrying on this tradition in the present with playful and provocative literary gestures as a sign of the deepest black devotion: When memoir refers to love and loss in the language of the “light of the world” (Alexander 2015). When a book of poetry takes the name *The New Testament* (Brown 2014). When a poet recalls the formation of literary community and acknowledges that “for some of us it was church” (Nguyen 2016). Or when a journalist makes it just a bit more explicit—in the aftermath of the slayings in Charleston’s Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church—and confesses, “Black folks are *my* church, preaching the value of black life is my ministry and blackness is my sanctuary” (Lemieux 2015).

On closer inspection, beyond black history hashtags and movement songs updated with the sonic landscapes of hip-hop, the Movement for Black Lives and this black literary moment both bear the marks of something very *CHURCH* in the making.

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