

## INTRODUCTION

"I can't breathe." July 17, 2014, sharpened it. Eric Garner repeated it eleven times while camera phones captured his murder, while the excesses of police violence—the excesses that are central to and the grounds of policing itself—accosted him, grounded him, choked him. "I can't breathe," the announcement of his intensely singular experience, *his* experience of the ongoing act of racial animus, antiblack racism, violent policing, policing as segregation and the implementation of dispossession and displacement as policy that structures life in the United States. Yet and also, "I can't breathe," the announcement—through ventriloquizing, some voice enunciating modernity's violence—of what had been set into motion before him, a modality of thinking and conceiving black flesh as discardable, as inherently violent and antagonistic, as necessarily in need of removal, remediation, a modality of thinking and conceiving that is not just American but western, global in its reach. "I can't breathe" as both the announcement of a particular moment and rupture in the life world of the Garners, and "I can't breathe" as a rupture, a disruption, an ethical plea regarding the ethical crisis that has been the grounds for producing his moment, our time, this modern world.

The announcement, "I can't breathe," is not merely raw material for theorizing, for producing a theological and philosophical analysis. "I can't breathe" charges us to do something, to perform, to produce otherwise than what we have. We are charged to end, to produce abolition against, the episteme that produced for us current iterations of categorical designations of racial hierarchies, class stratifications, gender binaries, mind-body splits. "I can't breathe," Garner's disbelief, his black disbelief, in the configuration of the world that could so violently attack and assault him for, at the very worst, selling loosies on the street. "I can't breathe," also,

the enactment of the force of black disbelief, a desire for otherwise air than what is and has been given, the enunciation, the breathing out the strange utterance of otherwise possibility. If he could not breathe it was because of the violence of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy, a violence that cannot conceive of black flesh feeling pain, a violence that cannot think "I can't breathe" anything other than ploy, trick, toward fugitive flight. Garner's plea, his "I can't breathe," an ethical charge for those of us who are alive and remain to be caught up in the cause of justice against us violence, the episteme, that produced his moment of intensity, the moment of his assault and murder.

I

There is a vibration, a sonic event, a sound I want to talk about, but its ongoing movement makes its apprehension both illusory and provisional. Illusory because the thing itself is both given and withheld from view, from earshot. Provisional because it—the vibration, the sonic event, the sound—is not and cannot ever be stilled absolutely. It keeps going, it keeps moving, it is open-ended. It can be felt and detected but remains almost obscure, almost unnoticed. And this for its protection. And this, its gift. Giving something of itself while remaining a resource from which such force can eternally return and emerge. It is a resource that is plenteous, that exists in plentitude, always available and split from itself, split from while transforming into itself. It is the gift, the concept, the inhabitation of and living into *otherwise possibilities*. Otherwise, as word—otherwise possibilities, as phrase—announces the fact of infinite alternatives to what *is*. And what *is* is about being, about existence, about ontology. But if infinite alternatives exist, if otherwise possibility is a resource that is never exhausted, what *is*, what exists, is but one of many. Otherwise possibilities exist alongside that which we can detect with our finite sensual capacities. Or, otherwise possibilities exist and the register of imagination, the epistemology through which sensual detection occurs—that is, the way we think the world—has to be altered in order to get at what's there. Moving in and through us like the trillions of neutrinos that pass through each square inch of Earth every second, there but undetected until we create and utilize certain technologies in the service of harnessing that which is unseen to naked eyes. How to detect such sensuality, such possibility otherwise, such

alternative to what *is* as a means to disrupt the current configurations of power and inequity? How to detect, how to produce and inhabit otherwise epistemological fields, is the question of Black Study.

I believe in Black Study and *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* is about the movement toward and emergence of collective intellectual projects.<sup>1</sup> Black Study is the force of belief that blackness is but one critical and urgently necessary disruption to the epistemology, the theology-philosophy, that produces a world, a set of protocols, wherein black flesh cannot easily breathe. *Blackpentecostal Breath* argues that blackness is released into the world to disrupt the institutionalization and abstraction of thought that produces the categorical distinctions of disciplinary knowledge. To make a claim for *belief*—in and of Black Study—is to trouble and unsettle epistemological projects founded upon pure reason, pure rationality, in the service of thinking with and against how that which we call knowledge is produced and dispersed. Black Study is a wholly unbounded, holy, collective intellectual project that is fundamentally otherwise than an (inter)discipline. This refusal of disciplinary boundaries is important because disciplinary knowledges attempt resolution, attempt to “resolve” knowledge “into objectivity . . . that ha[s] characterized modern knowledge . . . with certainty.”<sup>2</sup> *Blackpentecostal Breath* is not about resolve but about openness to worlds, to experiences, to ideas. *Blackpentecostal Breath* does not so much arrive at conclusions as it carries with concepts. In this book, I attempt to think about and with otherwise possibilities with regard to the production of knowledge, a production predicated on the performance of resistance, a resistance that precedes what exists before any encounter.

Imagination is necessary for thinking and breathing into the capacities of infinite alternatives. Blackpentecostal aesthetics, this work will argue, are but one enactment of alternative modes, alternative strategies, for organizing, performing and producing thought. In a very real and material way, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* is a meditation on the violence that infused and produced the occasion for Eric Garner’s announcement. *Blackpentecostal Breath* attends to the fact that racial categorization and distinction is but one way to think the world, one way to consider organizing, and racial categorization and distinction is, in many and fundamental ways, about the disruption and interruption of the capacity to breathe in the flesh.

*Blackpentecostal Breath* contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship by existing in the nexus of performance theory, queer theory, sound studies, literary theory, theological studies, and continental philosophy. This to explore how social life emerges—in thought, sound, and sexuality—for those considered occupying “the position of the unthought.”<sup>3</sup> The immediate objects of study I engage are the aesthetic practices found in Blackpentecostalism, a multiracial, multiclass, multinational Christian sect that finds one strand of its genesis in 1906 Los Angeles, California. I argue throughout that the aesthetics of Blackpentecostalism constitute a performative critique of normative theology and philosophy. Indeed, the tradition of these performances is an atheological-aphilosophical project, produced against the grain of liberal logics of subjectivity. Theology and Philosophy both, I argue, have at the core a subject, a subjectivity, enacting the categorical distinction of thought. Blackness is an abolitionist, decolonial project that resists the role of the subject and, thus, has no capacity to produce the thought of the would-be theologian, the would-be philosopher. In contradistinction to the desire for subjectivity, *Blackpentecostal Breath* elaborates upon the extra-subjective mode of being together that is the condition of occasion for envisioning, and living into such envisioning, a critique of the known—the violent, oppressive, normative—world. The performative practices of Blackpentecostalism constitute a disruptive force, generative for imagining otherwise modes of social organization and mobilization.

Blackpentecostalism is an intellectual practice grounded in the fact of the flesh, flesh unbounded and liberative, flesh as vibrational and always on the move. Such practice constitutes a way of life. The practices I analyze are a range of sensual, affective, material experiences: “shouting” as dance; “tarrying” as stilled intensity and waiting, as well as raucous praise noise; “whooping” (ecstatic, eclipsed breath) during praying and preaching; as well as, finally, speaking in tongues. These practices of Blackpentecostalism not only trouble the assumptive logics of gender but also unmoor the matters of sex and sexuality. I ultimately argue that these choreographic, sonic, and visual aesthetic practices and sensual experiences are not only important objects of study for those interested in alternative modes of social organization, but they also yield a general hermeneutics, a methodology for reading culture. What I am arguing throughout is that the disruptive capacities found in the otherwise world of Blackpentecostalism

is but one example of how to produce a break with the known, the normative, the violent world of western thought and material condition. Black aesthetics are Blackpentecostal; they are unbounded and found in the celebration of the flesh.

Blackpentecostalism does not belong to those Saints called Blackpentecostal, those Saints that attend traditionally considered Pentecostal church spaces. Rather, Blackpentecostalism belongs to all who would so live into the fact of the flesh, live into this fact as a critique of the violence of modernity, the violence of the Middle Passage and enslavement, the violence of enslavement and its ongoing afterlife, live into the flesh as a critique of the ongoing attempt to interdict the capacity to breathe. The aesthetic practices cannot be owned but only collectively produced, cannot be property but must be given away in order to constitute community. Blackpentecostalism—and those that would come to describe themselves as such—is sent into the world; it is an aesthetic practice that was sent and is about being sent: “to be sent, to be transported out of yourself, it’s an ecstatic experience, it’s not an experience of interiority, it’s an experience of exteriority, it’s an exteriorization. And so we’re sent. We’re sent to one another. We are sent by one another to one another . . . we’re sent by one another to one another until one and another don’t signify anymore.”<sup>24</sup> Being beside oneself, beside oneself in the service of the other, in the service of constituting and being part of an unbroken circle, a critical sociality of intense feeling: this is Blackpentecostalism. Focusing on this particular religious group brings into view, brings into hearing, the way such performances produce otherwise possibilities for thought, for action, for being and becoming.

How to go about this, to go about producing a critical analysis and a way forward, a way otherwise, is the work in this book. In *Blackpentecostal Breath*, I consider categorical distinction and how the possibility for producing pure distinction is the grounds for racism, sexism, homo- and transphobia, classism and the like. I do this by considering the categories of theology and philosophy to ask: What counts, and who decides what counts, as a theological and/or philosophical thought? Analyses of aesthetic practices found in Blackpentecostalism—of, for example, speaking in tongues and whooping during preached moments—urge against these categorical distinctions. The theologian and philosopher ground their identity in the capacity to produce categorically distinct modes of

thought as theological, as philosophical. And what then obtains as theological thought, as philosophical thought, is decided by the would-be theologian, the would-be philosopher. Circular logic, indeed. Blackpentecostal aesthetics, I argue, are against such distinctions grounded in the identity of the one making such a claim for thought.

Whiteness is a way to think the world; it has its theological and philosophical resonances and employments; it has its theological and philosophical employments. It is a violent encounter, an encounter and way of life that is fundamentally about the interdiction, the desired theft, of the capacity to breathe. Eric Garner is but one example of this. As a way to think the world and one's relation to it, whiteness is about the acceptance of violence and violation as a way of life, as quotidian, as axiomatic. Black social life has been the constant emergence of abolition as the grounding of its existence, the refusal of violence and violation as a way of life, as quotidian. Black social life, to be precise, is an abolitionist politic, it is the ongoing "no," a black disbelief in the conditions under which we are told we must endure. Cheryl Harris in her influential "Whiteness as Property" demonstrated the ways whiteness in this particular epistemological moment, this long moment, is grounded in the capacity for ownership, for acquiring objects.<sup>5</sup> Whiteness is a capacity for possession as the grounds for identity, and we learn from indigenous and settler colonial studies that the settler state stakes its claim on the acceptance of violence, the claim of property that produces a displacement from land, a violent encounter with peoples. Those of us accepting the fact of our living in, our inhabitation of the flesh seek abolition from this way of life, from this way of thinking relation. Life in the flesh is seeking otherwise possibilities not just for our "own" but for the world to live, to be, truly liberated. And insofar as being sent, Blackpentecostalism is the performance of otherwise possibilities in the service of enfleshing an abolitionist politic. I take the idea of enfleshing and enfleshment from M. Shawn Copeland's work.<sup>6</sup> I think of enfleshment as distinct from embodiment and will argue throughout the text that enfleshment is the movement to, the vibration of, liberation and this over and against embodiment that presumes a subject of theology, a subject of philosophy, a subject of history.

Blackpentecostalism is a social, musical, intellectual form of otherwise life, predicated upon the necessity of ongoing otherwise possibilities. I do not say new. I say otherwise. Using otherwise, I seek to underscore the ways

alternative modes, alternative strategies, alternative ways of life *already* exist, indeed are violently acted upon in order to produce the coherence of the state. I look particularly at the *tradition*—I do not say history intentionally—of the religious twentieth-century Pentecostal movement's roots in blackness, blackness the testament to the fact of object's resistance.<sup>7</sup> I consider dancing, singing, noise making, whooping, and tongue talking as ways to resist normative modes of theological and philosophical reflection, the same sorts of thought that produce categorical differentiation-as-deficiency such as race, class, gender, slave, and so on. I argue that the aesthetic practices of Blackpentecostalism constitute a performative critique of normative theology and philosophy that precede the twentieth-century moment. The practices existed, in other words, before they were called Blackpentecostal, before a group cohered on Bonnie Brae Street for prayer in April 1906.

During the antebellum era, both clergy and scholars alike levied incessant injunctions against loud singing and frenzied dancing in religion and popular culture. Calling for the relinquishment of these sensual spiritual experiences, I argue that these injunctions led to a condition where Blackpentecostal aesthetics were and are considered to be excessive performances, unnecessary because of their purported lack of refinement, discardable because of their seeming lack of intellectual rationality and rigor. And this because the flesh performing such aesthetic practices, the intellectual capacity, the capacity for thought and imagination, came to be racialized and gendered, and such racializing and gendering meant the denigration of black flesh. *Blackpentecostal Breath* investigates how discourses that emerged within the cauldron of spatiotemporal triangular trades in coffee, tea, sugar, and human flesh of new world slavery necessitated a theology and philosophy of race and, consequently, the racializing of aesthetic practices. Theology and philosophy would come to work together to target the object of blackness, thus theology-philosophy. Before and against this discursive theology-philosophy were the performance practices of Blackpentecostalism, an atheology-aphilosophy. These sensual experiences were not merely performed through duress but were the instantiation and sign of life and love. As life and love, these performative dances, songs, noises, and tongues illustrate how enjoyment, desire, and joy are important for the tradition that antiphonally speaks back against aversion, embarrassment, and abandonment, against

the debasement and denigration of blackness. Fundamentally, *Blackpentecostal Breath* is about the possibility for Black Study, about the capacity for aesthetics typically deemed excessive to be constitutive, can provide new models for collective intellectual practice. Black Study is a methodological mode of intense, spiritual, communal intellectual practice and meditative performance. I write about the forms life takes that rise to the occasion of particular moments—a mode of thinking of performance as a critical intervention into the very concept of the historical, of historical being. This may prove troubling for religious historians, but I want to pressure the assumption about the narrativity of historical events to think through other lineages, to move toward, after Foucault, genealogy rather than archeology.<sup>8</sup> This is no history of the modern global Pentecostal movement. I am not looking so much for missing documents as much as I am looking for the “broken claim to connection”<sup>9</sup> between anything that has receded into the *ago* and that which bears down on the *now* moment through its categorical *soon*-ness. I am not primarily concerned with creating an historicist project with names, dates, and primary, spectacular events that took place on Azusa Street, and things that both preceded and came after that particular flashpoint.<sup>10</sup> As a critique of the concept of *the historical*, to be elaborated in Chapter 3 particularly, *Blackpentecostal Breath* may prove troubling for those seeking a historical review of dates, times, and events. *Blackpentecostal Breath* presses against the assumption about the narrativity of historical events to think through other lineages, other inheritances, for performance practice. That is, performance constitutes a tradition, tradition against History.

*Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* is about, and is an attempt to produce, Black Study. Black Study is similar to what Denise Ferreira da Silva describes as “knowing (at) the limits of justice,” that is “at once a kind of knowing and doing; it is a praxis, one that unsettles what has come before but offers no guidance for what has yet to become.”<sup>11</sup> And Black Study is a particular strategy of mixture, “self-life-writing” of both “cultural and political critique.”<sup>12</sup> For this reason, *Blackpentecostal Breath* moves in and out of the autobiographical, the fictional, the performative, the theological, and the philosophical in order to enact a politicocultural criticism, one that is unflinching in its belief in blackness as a social, traditioned, anoriginal force of change, resistance, pleasure, and love in the world. *Blackpentecostal Breath* is an exercise of the otherwise possibility,



thinking and desiring more than what we have, knowing we already have enough to produce flourishing in the world.

Though not producing a history of Pentecostalism, it still seems consequential to place the tradition I explicate to guide you, the reader, through the work. So briefly: Blackpentecostalism has one strand of its genesis in April 1906 in Los Angeles, California. I choose the April 1906 moment for what is known colloquially among believers as the “outpouring of the Spirit” for ethical and political reasons, because of the characters that were there in that moment. William Seymour is a character of prominence. Born and raised in Centerville, Louisiana on May 2, 1870, to parents that were emancipated just years previous to his birth, Seymour was baptized in the Catholic tradition at the Roman Catholic Church of the Assumption, and his family attended the New Providence Baptist Church near their home. From an early age, he was used to various confessions and traditions, such that a certain openness to seeking spiritual fulfillment would be a structuring logic for his life. This openness meant a refusal to denigrate various traditions; indeed, Seymour was against the various denominational factions that would spar over doctrinal truths years later. Seymour was not interested in beginning a denomination or a sect; he believed the outpouring of Spirit was available for all regardless of confession.

Seymour left his hometown of Centerville in the 1890s and traveled north, itinerating mostly as a restaurant server. “A critical turning point came when he moved to Indianapolis in 1895, where although he continued to visit other states for brief periods, he stayed until 1900.”<sup>13</sup> It was in Indianapolis where he attended Simpson Chapel Methodist Episcopal Church, a black congregation. There, he accepted the call to ministry and began to preach. He was a seeker of experience, profound experience and encounter, with his notion of the divine. And it was his encounter with a group called the Evening Light Saints that Seymour saw the first evidence of the possibility for interracial reconciliation and fellowship grounded in faith. “This socially progressive, radical Holiness group preached racial equality and reconciliation around the beginning of Jim Crow segregation and actively reached out to blacks.”<sup>14</sup> Whatever would come to animate Seymour’s idea about faith and conviction would have to include an openness to those that have been marginalized and such openness would have to be lived out as a way to disrupt the normative world. “The [Evening Light] Saints provided him with one of his first visions of a racially egalitarian church—a vision

he remained true to the rest of his life."<sup>15</sup> Ordained by the Evening Light Saints, he eventually left the north to find lost family members in Texas. And it was in Texas that he first heard the message of tongues.

Seymour joined a Holiness church pastored by Lucy Farrow in Houston. "In Houston Seymour met Pastor Lucy Farrow, the woman who would introduce him to the doctrine and experience of Pentecostal Spirit baptism and began attending her Holiness church."<sup>16</sup> In addition to leading a church, Farrow worked for Charles Parham, a prominent figure in Pentecostal history. He founded a school that taught Spirit baptism including speaking in tongues as evidence of this work of grace. Because of her relationship with Parham, Farrow was able to arrange for Seymour to attend the school, though because of segregation, he was not allowed to sit in the same classroom or pray in the same space with the white students. After learning as much as he felt possible from sitting under Parham, and after having preached several times under Parham's tutelage, in 1906, Seymour told Parham that the Lord told him to go to California. Parham was not happy about this and tried to get Seymour to relent, but he would not.

Seymour left Texas and arrived to Los Angeles in February 1906. He began a prayer meeting at 216 North Bonnie Brae Street with Ruth and Richard Asberry, a prayer meeting wherein they would tarry—wait with fervent prayer and song—intensely for the experience of Spirit baptism. April 9, 1906, was the first day someone of the group experienced Spirit baptism, Edward S. Lee. And a couple of days later, April 12, was the first time Seymour himself experienced Spirit baptism. People heard about the prayer meeting and began to gather at the house of the Asberrys so Seymour had the group move from North Bonnie Brae to 312 Azusa Street, a converted horse stable. It was the Azusa Street building where news spread globally of the "outpouring of the Spirit" in ways unlike any of the other revival similar revival meetings that occurred previous to this April 1906 flashpoint.

Named the Apostolic Faith Mission, people came from across the country to experience what they heard was occurring. And because of Seymour's experiences with the Evening Light Saints and others, he was committed to intentional egalitarianism in the meeting space. White men and women prayed for and with black women and men, Latinx persons were there at the very beginning, Korean and Jewish too. It was noted, even in the first news story about this new group, how the interraciality was a flout

to the normative ideals of racial categorization and distinction.<sup>17</sup> Seymour harnessed the power of Spirit baptism, he—in other words—marshaled the power of aesthetic practice in the service of imagining, and living into such imagining, otherwise possibilities. He wanted to create an alternative mode of existence that would disrupt the here and now of his inhabitation. Unlike Parham (about which more in Chapter 4), Seymour was not content to allow the organization and hierarchies of race, gender, and class to remain intact after an encounter with Spirit baptism. Rather, Seymour and those in his tradition, utilized the various aesthetic practices discovered on the wooden floors of 312 Azusa Street to become a disruptive force. And it is for this reason that I write April 1906 as the beginning of this movement, the beginning of the movement of otherwise possibilities already set into motion and being enacted before Seymour's moment. Such that the "beginning" is misnomer, is impure, is—to return to the beginning—illusory and provisional. Seymour and the ones that would move with him simply lived into the black aesthetic, the black radical tradition, the already moving tradition of Blackpentecostal performance.

## II

What does it mean—to riff on, and thus off, Immanuel Kant—to orient oneself in thinking . . . *theologically* and *philosophically*? What does it mean to place oneself into a conceptual zone and category of distinction and to think from such a "place"? How does thought emerge from that which has been deemed, a priori, a categorically distinct modality of thought? And just what desires for purity undergird such a drive toward thinking from the categorically distinct zone? Air, the impure admixture, had to be let out of thought, had to be evacuated. Thought's flourishing, its leaps and bounds, must be strangled. Thought, through desired categorical distinction, is made to not breathe. The possibility for distinction that is categorical, that is in the end pure, is the *problem* of Enlightenment thought. Pure difference. This is what theological and philosophical thought attempt to achieve. Thought from within its own delimitation, purely different from—through excluding—*other* thought. Racialization is but one modality of creating a purely distinct category as a means to confront and contend with difference. The difference that is racialization must be made to be pure, and must be made to be maintained by the very possibility of pure difference.

The nominational moment convoking color as a means to think distinction—from within theology, philosophy—distinction that is race, to think blackness and whiteness, did not simply mean that skin was targeted. An entire range of sensual experiences—sound, smell, touch—were selected for such a racializing thought project. Thought had to be, in effect, made to be pure. Such thought was to be categorically distinct while *creating* the means through which categorically pure zones of thought could emerge. In a word, provocative though it may be: to think theologically, to think philosophically, is to think racially. It is to produce thought through the epistemology of western constructions. To attend to the necessary antiblackness of raciality is to summon us to be attentive likewise to the necessary antiblackness of theological-philosophical thought. They both emerge from the desire for pure thought, thought that is purely different from other modalities of cognition. Blackness was, is, and is still to come, as a destabilizing force against the project of racial purity, of aesthetic distinction. This remains to be elaborated through *Blackpentecostal Breath*.

I turn to two specific examples—not as a means to dismiss thought that emerges from within—but to illustrate the very delimitation with which we are confronted. So to turn to black womanist and queer theology is, for me, to demonstrate both the force of thought and the perniciousness of the epistemology of western civilization. As an example, concerns about blackness and the logic of western civilization inform my reading of Kelly Brown Douglas's offering, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant*.<sup>18</sup> Douglas's main thesis is that the black church has a problem with bodies, with what she calls a *blues* body: "The black woman's body is a blues body. The highs and especially the lows of blues culture are associated with their bodies. It is the black woman's body that has been at the center of the contestations about blues in the black community."<sup>19</sup> Central to Douglas's text is the experience of black womanhood, as she believes the testimonies and songs of black blues women is most emphatically, intentionally, and explicitly illustrative of what it means to be rendered both central to and marginalized within the black church. The blues body, the black woman body, is a disruption to notions of civility and decorum; the more this body performs its wildness—the more one accepts one's condition of fleshliness—the more disruptive and in need of coercive control.

What Douglas demonstrates is the capacity for the blues to be an irruptive force for social life, how blues bodies manifest a mode of being in

but not of worlds of normative function and form. Not only disruptive of racist, classist, elitist ideologies of which whiteness serves as foundational, the blues has the capacity to interrupt black church aspirations toward respectability. The black church will be at its best when it leaves behind aspirations for respectability because such aspirations are, at base, antiblack. It is the antiblackness of white theological thought that renders black bodies lascivious, that renders our sexualities and gender expressions—a priori—in need of conversion.

This body-denying/body-phobic culture in large measure points to the impact of a 'white gaze' upon the black church community. As black people tried to gain acceptance within white society by changing the black image in the white mind, they adopted white cultural standards of 'respectability.' In the main, these standards reflected Western dualistic perspectives that did not respect the body.<sup>20</sup>

Douglas successfully points readers to the antiblackness of aspirational modalities of black Christianity, the antiblackness that undergirds respectability politics even when that politics is deployed in the name of, in the service of, people who have been—historically and contemporarily—marginalized because they are, because we are, through the ideation of racial purity and categorical difference, rendered "black." But how do western dualistic perspectives affect how we think the capacity to produce thought as theological? How is western dualistic thinking grounded in the desire for pure difference such that the dualism can be obtained? How, in other words, is theology, as categorically pure and distinct from other modalities of thought, also a construction of western dualistic perspectives? How is theology antiblack and, thus, antiblues?

Intriguingly, for this reader at least, is how the concern over purity that sets off the very concept of theology as a modality of thought—a mode of thought that disavows materiality—runs against the very elaboration of the blues that Douglas is so very attentive. That to ask: Does not the blues in all its varied enfolded manifestations Douglas describes—blues bodies, blues hope, blues bonds, blues song, as examples—act as an antagonism not merely to the black church's resistance to blues, to secularity, but to the very conceptual domain, zone, field of categorical distinction called theology? Theology produces the notion of heterosexual life that needs to be contained and controlled:

[Marcella] Althaus-Reid argues that the theological tradition is sexually saturated by male heterosexual fantasies. As a result, nonnormative persons—heterosexual and lesbian women, gay men, bisexuals, transgender[] persons—and their desires are placeless, shadow realities amid the small reiteration of supposed truths about God, which are always also stories about proper sexual conduct in service of heterosexist spiritual governance. Theology is effectively much more about the control of women's bodies than about God, or rather discourse about God is a way of keeping nonnormative experiences and desires marginal. Theology's official heteronormativity is tightly interwoven with colonialism and the silencing of non-Euro, non-modern, noncapitalist 'others.' Systematic theology is a way that church intellectuals keep sexuality from the ambiguous, polymorphic expressions—that 'others' press and sublimate—that would otherwise open new vistas on divinity. [(Systematic) Theology is a] pornographic system that holds women in place by inventing and policing the difference between 'decent' and 'indecent' talk about experience . . .<sup>21</sup>

Tom Beaudoin argues that theology, theological tradition, is about the control of flesh, about the fantasies of heterosexual desire and the muting of nonnormativity. Blues are nonnormative, and Douglas's blues bodies would be likewise. Such that if the blues does anything—and Douglas's attentiveness to the refusal of distinction between sacred and secular in the songs and lives of blues folks is instructive—it compels us to rethink the efficaciousness of the categorical distinction. That is, Douglas ends up reproducing the logic of exclusion by forcing the blues into to the hermeneutic work of theology, by asking it to do the work that perhaps ends up participating in the fantasy of heterosexuality and male control. And this would not only be true of Douglas. We can perhaps ask how theologies *black*, theologies *womanist*, theologies *mujerista*, theologies *liberation* do the work of reifying the seeming import of theology as categorical. How is it the production of theology ends up being a mode of respectability, constricting the bluesiness of blues to the strictures of an abstracted, delimited zone and field of inquiry?

What the blues are, what the blues do—if we trust Douglas's elaboration of them, which we should—is to break altogether with the imperative of the categorical distinctive. It must be interrogated: What counts,

and who decides what counts, as a theological thought? Douglas submits the wildness and irruptive force of the blues to a *Christological* theological rendering, a doubled submission that abstracts and mutes—as so many trumpets in Harlem nightclubs—without the aesthetic adornment, excesses, or flourishes. The theologian's very identity is produced through the capacity to “think theologically” as a pure category, as a purely distinct mode of thought. And this is not only true for theology but philosophy as well. “Establishing identity, the identity of the philosophical through the work of differentiation, takes place, for example, in Hegel's argument that while philosophy may involve thought it needs to be distinguished from what he describes as ‘thought in general’. The force of this distinction lies first in the possibility, once it is formulated, of presenting philosophy as escaping any reduction to common sense.”<sup>22</sup> It is the thought in *general*, the social, the common, that is target of remediation in Hegel's thought, in philosophy generally. Though speaking specifically about Hegel, what Andrew Benjamin offers about the establishment of identity through the capacity to think a discipline, to think a field of categorical distinction, can and should be generalized. And I want to generalize against the ways generality is thought to be an obstacle, a problem, for proper thought and intellectual reflection. The blues antagonize such distinctions grounded in the identity of the one making such a claim for thought. The aesthetic practices of the blues moves us beyond simply interrogating who gets to make such a declaration about certain modalities of thought being theological in order to argue that the declaration itself—that some thought is theological over and against other kinds of thought—is a problem. It does not matter if the adjectival appendage is black, womanist, liberation, or queer. The capacity to make the distinction seems grounded in the necessity for exclusionary practice. What the blues demonstrate is not the working of theological thought but a critique of the capacity to make something theological, which is to say the capacity to make the pure distinction, the purely different.

In EL Kornegay's *A Queering of Black Theology: James Baldwin's Blues Project and Gospel Prose*, I find another iteration of the way theology, as method, constrains the radical potentiality of the object of study, the object of observation. James Baldwin is an important figure to consider because of the lingering presence Blackpentecostalism was in his life, the way it interrupted and infused his social, political, ethical projects—from

the fictive to the poetic, from the theater to the essay critical. There is no James Baldwin without the radical force of Blackpentecostalism, the sound and feel, the feel and verve, the verve and movement of the religious social practice. In Kornegay's work, it becomes clearer to me why the focus on blues in black and womanist theology reproduces the delimitation of categorically distinct and pure modalities of thought. It is because of a dematerialization of the blues, the way the blues becomes rendered as disconnected from the sound, from the vibration, from the note. Kornegay, in his work, describes the ways he believes Baldwin is guided by what he calls a "blues poetics," yet this poetics is dematerialized, abstracted, not the result of the blues as material fact, as texture and weight, not the result of the blues as sound, as note. Writing about Baldwin's metaphorization of the Blues, Kornegay says:

The term music does not refer here to a rhythm accompaniment of horns, symbols [*sic*], drumbeats, but what Baldwin calls the experience of black life. . . . [He] write[s] about how James Baldwin's use of the blues as the language/linguistics/semiotics of sexualized discourse signifies on the limitations of depravity placed on racialized and sexualized blues bodies [and that] the blues is a sexual and sensuous language enabling racialized, sexualized, and othered blues bodies to resist theological violence.<sup>23</sup>

Yet what of its sound, what of the blue note, the flatted fifth? That is, what of the materiality of sound, the vibratory frequency with which such a project of sound and song cuts and augments, is made manifest in the world? The reduction of blues to linguistics is a dematerialization, it seems to me, that is of necessity in the project of theology itself. It is a dematerialization not unlike the problem posed by the smell and funk that emanates from Argentinian women while selling lemons on the street without underwear that cuts against producing theology.

Should a woman keep her pants on in the streets or not? Shall she remove them, say, at the moment of going to church, for a more intimate reminder of her sexuality in relation to God? What difference does it make if that woman is a lemon vendor and sells you lemons in the streets without using underwear? Moreover, what difference would it make if she sits down to write theology without underwear? The Argentinian woman theologian and the lemon vendors may have some things in common and others not.



In common, they have centuries of patriarchal oppression, in the Latin American mixture of clericalism, militarism and the authoritarianism of decency, that is, the sexual organisation of the public and private spaces of society. However, there may be differences too. The lemon vendor sitting in the street may be able to feel her sex; her musky smell may be confused with that of her basket of lemons, in a metaphor that brings together sexuality and economics. But the Argentinian theologian may be different. She may keep her underwear on at the moment of prayer, or whilst reflecting on salvation; and maybe the smell of her sex doesn't get mixed with issues of theology and economy. Writing theology without underwear may be punishable by law, who knows . . . Yet, an Argentinian feminist theologian may want to do, precisely, that. Her task may be to deconstruct a moral order which is based on a heterosexual construction of reality, which organises not only categories of approved social and divine interactions but of economic ones too. The Argentinian theologian would like then to remove her underwear to write theology with feminist honesty, not forgetting what it is to be a woman when dealing with theological and political categories.<sup>24</sup>

Marcella Althaus-Reid offers a way to think about the way nonnormative flesh undoes the project of theology and perhaps that might be the point. Perhaps we should remove those layers of material and intellectual cloth that have us bound within projects of normativity. Althaus-Reid offers a way to read and think and produce otherwise than theology by attending to the flesh, by considering the *primacy* of flesh for intellectual projects collective. Althaus-Reid, in the name of theology, writes against the project of theology. This writing against is what I attempt. What is dematerialized in theology is the materiality of funk, the materiality of unworn cloth. This dematerialization shares with the dematerialization of the blues. Perhaps we need become indecent and queer *against* theology. So to return to Kornegay, queering theology is forcing the radical potentiality of otherwise possibility that is queerness, its enactment, its otherwise modality and way of life, to inhere, to be subject to, to submit to the forces of a predetermined and given line of thought.

What can we make of the material trace that lingers within and makes itself felt, known, in Baldwin's writing, the material trace of Blackpentecostal aesthetic practice, the breath and tongues, the choreography and sonicity, that remains in his work, even when he writes against religion? I quote Baldwin at length:

Well, that winter in Switzerland, I was working on my first novel—I thought I would never be able to finish it—and I finally realized that one of the reasons that I couldn't finish this novel was that I was ashamed of where I came from and where I had been. I was ashamed of the life in the Negro church, ashamed of my father, ashamed of the Blues, ashamed of Jazz, and, of course, ashamed of watermelon: all of these stereotypes that the country inflicts on Negroes, that we all eat watermelon or we all do nothing but sing the Blues. Well, I was afraid of all that; and I ran from it.

When I say I was trying to *dig back* to the way I myself must have spoken when I was little, I realized that I had acquired so many affectations, had told myself so many lies, that I really had buried myself beneath a whole fantastic image of myself which wasn't mine, but white people's image of me.

I realized that I had not always talked—obviously I hadn't always talked—the way I had forced myself to learn how to talk. I had to find out what I had been like in the beginning, in order, just technically as a writer, to re-create Negro speech. I realized it was a cadence; it was not a question of dropping s's or n's or g's, but a question of the *beat*. Bessie had the beat. In that icy wilderness, as far removed from Harlem as anything you can imagine, with Bessie and me. . . .

Those Swiss people really thought I had been sent by the devil; it was a very strange . . . they had never seen a Negro before. In this isolation I managed to finish the book. And I played Bessie every day. A lot of the book is in dialogue, you know, and I corrected things according to what I was able to hear when Bessie sang, and when James P. Johnson plays. It's that *tone*, that sound, which is in me.<sup>25</sup>

What is needed is an *atheological-aphilosophical* accounting, a *digging back*, a *movement within*, listening to and feeling the vibration of the tone, *black tone*. Theology, as a project, seeks to remediate the verve and flow of tone, black tone, it seeks to move forward, eschatologically toward some future end when instead, perhaps we should have a preferential option for the *digging back*. Baldwin's attention to the sound, to the tonality by which speech happens and his desire to recover it for his poetics, means that the work needs to be materialized through the sound, through the tone, to mark its true achievement. His writing is not antithetical to the material

force of the form that speech, song, takes but must be materialized *through* the materiality, the texture and weight, the thickness and intensity, of vibration, of sound, of sonic force.

The blues were never only ever about language, were never only about lyricism. Many churches were wary of Georgia Tom's music even after he converted, became Thomas Dorsey, and began writing for the church. And this because the sound of the song, not simply the lyrical content. Listen to, for example, "Deep Moaning Blues" with Ma Rainey on lead and Georgia Tom on piano:<sup>26</sup>

*My bell rang this morning, didn't know which way to go*  
*My bell rang this morning, didn't know which way to go*  
*I had the blues so bad, I sit right down on my floor*

It is not just the lyrics that resolve after the two repetitions in the lines beginning "My bell rang . . ." It is also the melodic line that resolves, that ends on the dominant, that ends on the tonic. The resolve, in the blues form, is a cause for joy, it is a displacement that is about the abandonment of strife that gives way to, that produces, feeling of the possibility of anxiety and solace. Nathaniel Mackey assists: "The orphan is such an archetypal figure, recurrent not only in my work but in world culture, because it tugs at the roots of our sense of belonging and the mix of anxiety and solace that goes with that sense."<sup>27</sup> Such production of the feeling of the possibility of anxiety and solace is en fleshed in a poetics that is about the practice of orphanage, of seeking, of journeying. And this orphanage, seeking, journey is heard not just in the lyrics but in the sound, in the resolve, in the movement away from and to the tonic. The blues ain't just the lyric. The blues is en fleshment; the blues is material. "The word is our rescue, whether spoken, written, sung, or nonverbally intoned, in part because the language of music and the music of language accent a tending-toward—'pointing-beyond-itself' in Victor Zuckerkandl's analysis of tonal motion, Ezra Pound's 'tone leading of vowels,' etc.—that might well be the beginning of kinship, or a therapeutic or cathartic analogue to it, at least . . . The song sung in a strange land asks how can it be sung in a strange land, lamenting lost connection and reaching toward would-be connection, tenuous connection perhaps."<sup>28</sup>

Baldwin's writing is not dematerialized but a gathering of the vibration, the ongoing movement of matter, in the cause of plays, poetry, prose.

Like Baldwin's poetics, the blues is but one iteration of a way of life whose "underlying drive is a longing that outlives its ostensible fulfillments, reaching beyond its ostensible objects."<sup>29</sup> The blues is a gathering of the materiality of vibration and announced as enunciation, announced as the displacement of air, announced—that is—as sound. What does this mean for an analytics, a theory, that thinks blackness, black flesh, the blueness of blackness as a drive that is never meant to be contained, never meant to reach some there? We can then ask what Douglas's and Kornegay's moves to the blues prepare us for but that of which they each, in their own ways, stop short: What makes thought theological in the first place, particularly when one resists western dualistic thought? These various black womanist theological focuses on the blues were to trouble the ease with which dualistic thought flourishes, created by the very strictures of whiteness and the aspirational qualities undergirding respectability politics. Yet, if the sacred/profane split is a result of enlightened thought, that split is also always racialized, gendered, classed, sexed. But if dualism is actually *not*, if categorical distinction of sacred from profane is unsettled through otherwise epistemologies, then what is thought that can be considered categorically as "theological" over and against other modalities of thought? If theology is "god talk," as is often colloquially offered, but talk in blackness is never categorically distinct or pure, what does it mean to do, think or be theology or theological? This is not to say that thought does not occur from within the zone called theology. *Blackpentecostal Breath* could not be offered into a conversation without the clearing work of those theologians *black* and *womanist* and *mujerista* and *liberationist* and *queer*, their work cleared ground through which I now move. The work I present is indebted to the various thinkers of these concepts, thinkers from within these zones and disciplines whose thinking, it seems to me, pushes up against the limits of those zones and disciplines. I am simply unsure about the efficaciousness of the delimitation placed on thought from the outside, then calling thought—delimited through forced violent encounter, a violence at least as old as the Middle Passage, though without a doubt older—"theological," "philosophical."

### III

Charles Mingus knew. Composer and musician, Mingus recognized the importance and impact of the midweek gathering of black folks at the Holiness-Pentecostal Church at 79th and Watts in Los Angeles that he'd attend with his stepmother or his friend Britt Woodman. Mingus tells the story of how his stepmother traveled weekly to the lively church services: "My father didn't dig my mother going there. . . . People went into trances and the congregation's response was wilder and more uninhibited. . . . The blues was in the Holiness churches—moaning and riffs and that sort of thing between the audience and the preacher."<sup>30</sup> These visits were the impetus for "Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting," a song that used 6/4 rhythmic propulsion in order to convey its message, in order to approach the aesthetic-intellectual force of what he'd feel on any given Wednesday night prayer service. Scott Saul described Mingus's 6/4 rhythm as taking "the traditional gospel rhythm and, by accelerating the overall tempo, [the rhythm] brought out the swinging cross-rhythms that had been hidden in the loping advance" of other recordings. Brought out in the song is that which was hidden from view, the excess—the gospel rhythming—that prompts gathering, an excess that at the same time constitutes and is the grounds for gathering. The sounds of love, the smells of food, the praising flesh. This is captured in the extended 11'54" performance of the song recorded in 1960 at Juan-les-Pins during the Antibes Jazz Festival for the album *Mingus at Antibes* released in 1976.

It opens with Mingus on bass, the announcement of pitch low, vibration slow. Feel the pulse-pulse of the movement, divine call and encounter, in and of openness to spirit. Like open doors to a church, like a prayer meeting for study, gathering together the dispersed parts of severed soci-ality. Refusing enclosure, refusing seclusion. Throughout this particular performance, the song increases in speed moment by moment. The saxophone solo at 7'40", the sax breaking off into what sounds like speaking in tongues. At 6'19", a clap interlude. The handclaps function to both keep and break with rhythm. The drums, the bass, the piano. Each instance of the solo enfolded the airy space with the black symphonic. You hear the density of the space when there is abandonment and reanimation of sound, when there is the leaving and arrival, the breaking away from and coming back to of instruments.

And there is the ethical demand of the prayer meeting felt, experienced, that Mingus's song attempts to capture. This ethics, this demand, is for openness and hospitality, improvisation and refusing to be done with seeking otherwise. To hear the saints testify, sing before the Lord, shout, get happy and do their dance. "Wednesday Night Prayer Meeting" was Mingus's memorial, homage, to black sociality. Mingus figured out that those gatherings were the constant repetition of an ongoing, deep, intense mode of study, a kind of study wherein the aesthetic forms created could not be severed from the intellectual practice because they were one and also, but not, the same. To transform such force of testimony, song, shout, happiness, dance into otherwise modality, otherwise feel. It was the black symphonic, the sounding out together of the ecology of gathering black being, blackness as becoming, as a force of critique and ethical demand upon the world. What one hears in the density of the space made through these prayer meetings is the sound of love, the sound of radical welcome beckoning the margin to join in. The sound of radical hospitality.

Yet radical hospitality did not stop murder. Dylan Roof's massacre of the nine parishioners at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina illustrates the ongoing ecological, ethical crisis. He said both: "everyone was so nice" and, "I had to go through with the mission." The parishioners were not nice but *so* nice; excess was the grounds of their engaging him, excess was the solicitation that made a space for him to leave the margins of the meeting and join with the others. Yet, he still performed the heinous act. What those saints in study offered him, through prayer and song and inviting him to be part of an unbroken circle, was nothing short of radical possibility of otherwise. What Roof experienced, however, he transformed into a merely aesthetic encounter, not one that had intellectual content, not one that could move him and let him, with reckless abandon, join the handclaps of hard-loved flesh. Beautiful, hard-loved flesh opened and became vulnerable for him, invited him into not the sanctuary but the basement, where the love is felt.

White terrorizing, white supremacist ideology, is produced by the suppression, the gathering and destroying, of such an openness, such a vitality, such a propulsive 6/4 rhythming. White supremacy, its rapacious and incessant antiblackness, is the constant emergence of fear, the fear of being engulfed, and changed, by this radical abundance. Dylan Roof murdering the members of Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, SC illustrates

the ways his was not the violence of someone who believed that social death—the state of total powerless—was achievable but was the violence of one terrified by its impossibility. The people he murdered were not the totally powerless but those who extended life, an otherwise mode of relationality, to him. He began shooting during the benediction when the eyes of the twelve gathered were closed. He began his violence when they were most open and vulnerable, when they were at the height of availability. Such vulnerability was evinced most in their closed eyes, their prayer for sociality of protection: “May the Lord watch between me and thee while we’re absent one from . . .” Interrupted. He had to, against the openness of love and hospitality felt and the prayer offered, enclose himself, shut down his sensual capacities, not be moved. He had to repress the desire to join in and with what was extended to him.

This is neither an exercise in “redeeming” Roof nor making less horrific the brutality and horror of his violent acts, his acts of violation. Rather, we hone in on the truly pernicious nature of the horror of white supremacist antiblack violence if we consider Roof as *responding to the irrepressible life offered, if we consider violence of the state against racialized communities that has been intensifying as a response to protest, life as protest, life in general*. Because that is the key. Such that we must answer: What to do, how to move, in such a world wherein your resistance against violent conditions—resistance as prayer meetings or protests, resistance as simply wishing to breathe—produces the occasion for violence? This is the ethical crisis to which we must be attuned, the ethical crisis to which *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* attempts to engage and offer reply.

#### IV

To produce a choreosonic encounter wherein not one—the choreographic nor the sonic—is privileged is the purpose of the work in *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*. What I attempt to do in the pages to come is elaborate what I have come to think of as *otherwise possibilities* for organizing, for thinking projects that neither make the flesh diminutive nor discardable. Rather, I want to give careful and thoughtful attention to the flesh, life in the flesh as the liberative position, as the liberative modality, *life in the flesh*—following Hortense Spillers—*as the way of empathy*.<sup>31</sup> How to discover in a religious practice normatively deemed excessive, excessive because of the performance of the flesh, the performance of the

flesh grounding the critique of such a world as unthoughtful—and as such, not philosophical nor theological—is what I set out to do in *Blackpentecostal Breath*. Thinkers I engage throughout the work include Hortense Spillers, Nahum Chandler, Fred Moten, Nathaniel Mackey, Michel Foucault, Saidiya Hartman, and Denise Ferreira da Silva. They inform the way I have come to think the keywords of the text: flesh, sociality, blackness, otherwise. And the text attempts to approach something of the aesthetic force of Blackpentecostal worship, though this certainly is no argument in favor of conversion. One does not enter into a church, for example, with expectations of all that will occur but often one will experience, one will hear, smell, see, touch before one is given explication of what has happened or the meaning thereof. The text desires something of this force of suggestion while also remaining clear that it is a theoretical intervention, a performance of the sociality elaborated.

I am not, it should also be said, making an argument that Blackpentecostalism is utopic, that it is free of the problems of marginalizing. Having grown up in the Blackpentecostal movement, as a member of the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), as a former choir director, musician, preacher, as the son of preachers, as one that was well on his way to ordination within the social world, I am all too familiar with the world's proclivities for classism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. I am not making an argument that the world exists without participating in practices that marginalize. But something is *there*, in the aesthetic practices, aesthetic practices that *are* collective intellectual performances, that serve as antagonistic to the very doctrines of sin and flesh that so proliferate within the world. What I mean is that the resource for critiquing the ways sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and classism inform the world exist within the world itself, the breakdown and critical analysis is an otherwise possibility full in its plurality and plentitude already within the world. It is a world of Black Study even against its sometimes vulgar and vile declarations of sin. Otherwise is a word that names plurality as its core operation, otherwise bespeaks the ongoingness of possibility, of things existing other than what is given, what is known, what is grasped. Otherwise possibility is what I think Blackpentecostal aesthetics produce for thinking blackness and flesh, for thinking blackness and performance, as gathering and extending that which otherwise is discarded and discardable, those two modalities as modes of being and existence. Otherwise names the subjectivity in the