Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics by Josef Sorett (review)

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seeking to understand the role of religion and race in American life, and in particular the religious imagination and religious practices of specific black religio-racial movements in the interwar period would do well to read carefully Weisenfeld's exemplary monograph.

Josef Sorett. *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 285 pp. $34.95.

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There is an enduring assumption in the Western academy that modernity introduced a stable division between the religious and the secular—or, between the sacred and the profane. According to this view, secularism renders religious commitments private and subjective, enabling science and reason to govern interactions in the public sphere. This widespread assumption about the transparency of the secular regime occasionally permits an exception regarding black people and African American religiosity. In other words, black religion, and black Protestantism particularly, is described as a space where the sacred and secular are indistinguishable or at least where the boundary is fluid. Josef Sorett's provocative, beautifully written text, *Spirit in the Dark*, examines the relationship between black religion and literature to test, expand, and revise the assumptions about the sacred/secular fusion in black life and experience. Motivated by Aretha Franklin's refusal to separate her political and spiritual music (she recorded the eponymous "Spirit in the Dark" in 1970) and Benjamin Mays's premature concerns about Harlem Renaissance writers' abandoning theological concerns, Sorett's book aims to show how Afro-Protestant motifs strongly inform black literary and aesthetic practices. Consequently, *Spirit in the Dark* provides both a "literary history of African American religion and a religious history of black literature" (7).

In opposition to those who would describe the Harlem Renaissance or the Black Arts Movement as secular, Sorett claims, "African American literature has since its advent and across its history been cut from religious cloth. . . . In fact, the very organizing logics, aesthetic practices, and political aspirations of the African American literary tradition have been decidedly religious. In short, black literature is religious. Better yet, it is an extension of the practice of Afro-Protestant Christianity" (2). For Sorett, the intersection between black literature and religion is most clearly seen in ongoing discussions about a unique black aesthetic and in related appeals to the "spirit" of black people. As the author points out, religion has been a "consistent and vital—yet always contested—ingredient in efforts to define (as well as debunk) the idea of a distinctive black literature and culture" (4). Black artists and writers within both the Harlem Renaissance and the later BAM discussed and debated the significance of religion as they each developed and contested versions of a racial aesthetic. Even though many of these writers did not attend a religious institution—and many rejected official doctrines associated especially with Afro-Protestantism—Sorett shows how black religion was often the discursive terrain that enabled and constrained discussions about the uniqueness of black culture. Connected to the matter of a distinctive black aesthetic is the grammar of spirit, a grammar that provides a strong link between black religion and art. For Sorett, paying attention to the different uses and connotations of the term "spiritual" within black art and literature—as it relates to black harmony and conflict, black

authenticity, *and* the transcendence of racial categories—enables us to track competing visions of black life, struggle, and liberation.

Each chapter in *Spirit of the Dark* contributes to the aim of "retelling the history of African American literature from the 1920s to the end of the 1960s with religion . . . at the center of the story" (16). And, as Sorett demonstrates, this story is layered, discordant, and full of characters that contest how this story should be told. In chapter one, the author shows how the New Negro movement, or the beginnings of the Harlem Renaissance, emerged through debates that often included the grammar of "spirit and church." Whereas some figures in the nascent movement (Alain Locke) urged black people to abandon, or at least distance themselves, from black Protestantism and embrace African-derived forms of spirituality, other writers like George Haynes and James Weldon Johnson contended that "churches ought to function as agents of social service and racial uplift" (51). (It is important to keep in mind that Locke's suspicion toward Protestantism was motivated by his embrace of a modern secularizing spirit and his concerns about the antiblack legacy of Christianity.) For Haynes and Johnson, the sermons, preaching styles, and songs associated with the black church should be central to the formation of a unique black aesthetic and a "revival" of the black spirit. Another debate that percolated in the New Negro movement pertained to the validity of a unique black expression. George Schuyler, for instance, famously rejected the notion of black people's distinctiveness, pointing to shared religious practices across the color line to corroborate his argument. In his rejoinder to Schuyler's satirical criticisms of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes claimed that a unique black expression is evident in black churches. As Sorett underscores, these debates among black literary figures occurred on religious terrain and were emboldened by spiritual grammars.

In chapter two, Sorett draws the reader's attention to various forms of ancestor piety within the Harlem Renaissance. Although this literary movement often touted the North and Harlem as sites of progress and opportunity, many of the authors (including Jean Toomer) looked to the Southern past for cultural resources. Others, like Romare Bearden, followed Locke by reaching back to Africa for spiritual motivation. In this chapter, Sorett offers an insightful reading of *Negro*, a 1934 anthology edited by the British heiress Nancy Cunard. Although not as well known as Locke's 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, Cunard's collection demonstrates the significance and variety of religious practices across the transatlantic diaspora. In addition, the volume included essays inspired by Marxism that endorsed class struggle and censured the black middle class. As Sorett points out, Cunard's collection "confirms the disciplining (and secularizing) power of the tropes of church and spirit to contain an African past, uplift ideologies, and Communist propaganda all at once" (65). The black spirit is capacious and includes multiple traditions and voices. Sometimes these voices clash, as in the case of the disagreements between Zora Neale Hurston and Richard Wright. In opposition to Hurston's tendency to underscore African retentions in African American culture, Wright's famous "Blueprint for Negro Writing" emphasizes how the Negro's way of life is the "product of slavery and Jim Crow" (76). Even though Wright offered a Marxist-inspired critique of the black church, he acknowledged that artists must engage black religion in the effort to create new symbols and myths.

The next three chapters of Sorett's book trace the expansion of black literary and religious expressions in the 1940s and '50s against the backdrop of historical developments in the United States and elsewhere. Chapter three, for instance, uses Claude McKay's conversion to Catholicism in 1944 to make a broader point about the catholicity of black culture—or how black aesthetic expressions cannot be contained within an Afro-Protestant framework. In his writings about black religion, McKay not only drew attention to unorthodox leaders like Father Divine and the Sufi activist Abdul Hamid; he also demonstrated how these figures represented

broader changes and shifts in the religious landscape of the United States. Because of McKay's unconventional views on race and racial aesthetics, Locke labeled him a "spiritual truant." Chapter four examines writers and artists who, in the late 1940s and early '50s, began to move away from black protest art and embrace the global, universalizing implications of black culture. Drawing attention to Baldwin's critique of Wright's Manichean racial theology and Ellison's insistence on the Negro's Americanness, this chapter examines figures that attempted to balance the idea of a black aesthetic with the complexities of black people's identities as American and world citizens. The poet Margaret Walker best captures this balancing act in her description of Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry. Brooks's poetry, Walker argued, "evinced a movement away from social protest. Black poets were now 'less preoccupied with race' and addressed it more as a 'point of departure toward a global point of view' " (135). Chapter five continues the "expanding spirit theme" by delineating the local and global predicaments that provided the impetus for the Black Arts Movement: anticolonial struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, radical alternatives to the integrationist aims of the civil rights movement, international black writers conferences, and the emerging sense that Islam was the "true black religion" (17) while Christianity needed to be reinterpreted through black culture.

The final two chapters examine the Black Arts Movement and those "spirits" that did not conform to BAM ideology. Chapter six introduces the reader to the sacred texts/anthologies of the movement, edited by figures like Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Addison Gayle, and Toni Cade Bambara. Broaching volumes like Baraka and Neal's *Black Fire* (1968) and Bambara's *The Black Woman* (1970), Sorett claims that "Black Arts Theorists aimed to institutionalize and evangelize on behalf of the black aesthetic by editing anthologies" (174). The artists and figures that attempted to forge this radical black aesthetic (new myths and symbols that valorized blackness) were spiritually eclectic as they drew resources from Christianity, Islam, and West African religious traditions. Yet, as the previous chapter foreshadows, many of the artists—not unlike Alain Locke—viewed Christianity as a hindrance to black unity and progress. Bambara demonstrated this attitude when she attributed sexism and male domination within black communities to Christianity and exalted premodern African cultures as exemplars of gender equality. One of the many contradictions in BAM, as noted by Ann Cook, was that in its affirmation of Islam, the artists tended to privilege Africa's literate societies and downplay its oral traditions. European thinkers often pointed to Africa's supposed lack of literary cultures as evidence of its being outside of history; "by affiliating with Islam, [BAM] actually reinforced European ideals and colonial authority" (194). While chapter six examines the complexities and limitations of forming a unique black aesthetic, the final chapter draws attention to figures like Albert Murray who, like Schuyler and Ellison, contested the notion of distinctive blackness and underscored the Americanness of the Negro. For Murray, black Americans are "omni-Americans," and the traditions and cultures they have created—rather than originating in Africa—are only possible in the democratic experiment that is America. At the same time, he maintained that the American democratic spirit has been largely influenced and propelled by the blues sensibilities of black people.

Sorett's *Spirit in the Dark* is a well-researched, refreshingly clear, and innovative text. It is a major achievement. While many people are familiar with the prosaic assumption that black art and religion are intertwined, or that black people show the limits of the secular-sacred divide—Sorett shows us *how* black religion and literature are entangled. His book introduces us to familiar and not so familiar figures in the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement as he demonstrates that the relationship between black religion and art is always complicated, messy, and fraught. These complications have everything to do with diverging perspectives on what constitutes blackness, determining a unique black aesthetic, or discovering

the spirit of black people. Perhaps what is most glaring in Sorett's historical analysis is how various tropes, themes, and contentions in black literature and religion repeat themselves over time. Is there a unique black aesthetic, or is blackness best understood as a subset of American culture? Should the spirit of black culture be directed toward racial protest or more "universal" goals and aspirations? Does Christianity, especially its Protestant expressions, hinder or promote black flourishing? How much do African cultures and religious practices influence black American life and how does one affirm these ongoing influences without reifying, or romanticizing the continent? It would seem like the next step is to trace how black artists, writers, and scholars currently navigate the tensions and possibilities bequeathed by previous cultural discourses. For instance, authors like Fred Moten and J. Kameron Carter mobilize the *black* in "black art" as a signifier for those forces and energies that cannot be fully captured or contained. For contemporary black studies, blackness is a metaphor for tumult ,while whiteness signifies yearnings for purity, possession, and settlement. While these formulations riff on the Black Arts and Black Power legacies, they don't necessarily promote racial essentialism (since black bodies are always being conscripted by the logics of whiteness).

Any attempt to think about the present and future implications of black religion and literature will have to go through Sorett's text. *Spirit in the Dark* will attract those interested in African American religious history, black literature, and black aesthetics. It will also appeal to scholars interested in renewed discussions about modernity and secularism. Those who desire a challenging read without academic jargon will appreciate the author's clear, patient, and generous writing style. And those interested in taking black religious thought to new plateaus and horizons will be galvanized by the "spirit" and energy of Sorett's study.
