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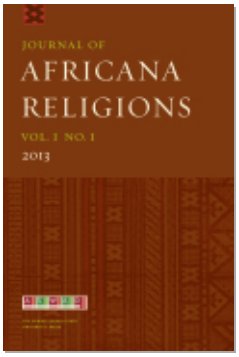
Invisible Women: On Women and Gender in the Study of African American Religious History



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Invisible Women

On Women and Gender in the Study of African American Religious History

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Abstract
In this essay I consider major themes in the scholarly treatment of African American women's religious history and explore how particular emphases in the broader field of African American religious history have marginalized women's experiences and contributions. I argue that mobilizing African American women's religious history and placing it at the center of our historical inquiry allows us to interrogate themes and foci that structure the accepted narrative of African American religious history. Moving beyond an approach that simply adds women to that accepted story, I suggest ways in which examining African American women's religious experiences might open up rich areas for research and new ways of conceiving the very shape of the field.

My grandmothers were strong.
They followed plows and bent to toil.
. . .
They were full of sturdiness and singing.
My grandmothers were strong.
—MARGARET WALKER, *Lineage*, 1942[1]

Some years ago, I began the first session of an undergraduate seminar I was teaching on black women and religion with a provocative assertion that, despite the initial confusion it caused among the students, proved to be quite

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intellectually productive over the course of our semester's work. The course offered students the opportunity to consider a variety of case studies from West, Central, and Southern Africa; from Central America and the Caribbean; and from the United States, and we explored such themes as religion and the life cycle, healing and folk practices, access to and modes of religious leadership, religion and politics, feminist theologies, and religion and the arts. On the first day I remarked that, even as I was excited about the material we would engage that semester, it seemed to me that it might not actually make intellectual sense to offer such a course. After all, I wondered aloud, what genuine connections existed between work as religious leaders of twentieth-century diviners and spirit mediums in East Africa and early nineteenth century women in the African Methodist Episcopal Church? On what basis, I asked, did it make sense for us to consider comparatively how age shaped the religious experiences and opportunities of a young girl in the Nation of Islam in the 1970s and a Garifuna grandmother in Belize? Once the students got over the initial dismay that they might have enrolled in a course with no intellectual core or conceptual glue or an instructor with no confidence in the very premise of her course, I emphasized how vital it was as scholars of religion that we not assume natural or self-evident religious connections among the various cases we would explore. So, too, as scholars of African and African diaspora experience, we could not proceed from the notion that the invisible bonds of racial essence drew the women in these examples into inevitably similar cultural expressions. At the same time, I emphasized to my students that I was not calling for an approach to these cases that would leave them bunkered in bounded national or religious contexts. Instead, we would attend to the specificity of local contexts and particular religious expressions as well as to routes of cultural connection and processes of rupture and transformation.

Africana religious studies has made some of its most significant and profound contributions to the many disciplines with which it intersects in balancing consideration of what the anthropologist James Clifford speaks of as "roots" and "routes," places of origin and processes of culture making in travel and contact.[2] Such routes include cultural and religious contact and transformation across Africa, the making of African diasporas as a result of capture and enslavement in the Americas, and the travel of successive moments of migration from Africa to Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the Americas. Consider, for example, the two texts that most influenced me to enter the field: Arthur Huff Fauset's *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the*

Urban North (1944) and Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the Antebellum South* (1978).[3] Although addressing African American religious life in divergent time periods, regions, and involving different traditions, both Fauset and Raboteau grapple with how to chart the diverse roots of African American religious practices, and both consider the implications of connections to, ruptures from, and transformations of those roots. Fauset and Raboteau also share in common a concern with understanding the power of religion for group formation, community survival, and personal spiritual satisfaction. For his part, Fauset was keen to resist the scholarly and popular stereotype of people of African descent as having a natural and innate religious temperament that served only compensatory functions in lieu of other social outlets. Such a discourse, Fauset knew, promoted a vision of African American religious culture as focusing on deferred spiritual reward that, in turn, contained the desire for political action.[4] Raboteau also rejected any notion of a natural religious propensity and directed his readers to careful consideration of a host of historical factors that fostered the production of the religious worlds of enslaved people in British North America. Numerous works since the publication of these groundbreaking texts have explored religious creativity and change within Africa, the contours of religious life in the Americas and the Caribbean, and the complex cultural flows of our increasingly globalized world in which it becomes difficult sometimes to locate a single root for the routes that people of African descent have charted.[5]

It was to this complex field of religious roots and routes that I called the students to attend. I can attest that they rose to the challenge of exploring each case in terms of its local religious contexts and resisted easy assumptions about essential racial connections and continuities while they also worked to identify relationships and influences across modes of religious expression. The students reflected on historical trajectories that led to continuities or transformations when relevant and reflected on the complex personal or systemic factors that might have led to religious rupture, discontinuity, or creativity.

The course's specific focus on women raised a number of additional questions and challenges that I would like to pursue in this essay with reference to my own field of specialization of African American religious history. The limits I have placed here on the scope of analysis in this brief piece are geographic and methodological. I approach the study of African American religious life primarily from the methodological perspective of the discipline of history, employing and interpreting evidence from the past (which may be

textual, visual, material, sonic, or embodied, for example) to ask questions about social change and continuity. The students in that particular seminar—all women—did not need much framing on my part to resist universalizing women's experiences across space, time, and culture. What captured their interest and attention with regard to our topic of black women, gender, and religion were questions about how the cases we explored related to the larger narratives of African and African diaspora religious history. They wondered how we were to understand broad arguments about the significance of religion in African American life and history, given that the historiography focused almost exclusively on male institutional leaders and theologians.[6] Moreover, many struggled to make sense of the fact that the church contexts that were important in their own lives were, in many ways, women's spaces, with women constituting the majority of members of congregations. These students gravitated to the course to learn more about African American women's religious history and about the experiences of black women in other geographic and religious settings. But they also kept in mind questions about the "general" histories of religions in Africa and African diasporic contexts as we proceeded. In this way, my students expanded my initial provocative question about what connected the cases we studied to one another to include the additional pressing and complex question of what linked each case to broader narratives of Africana religions.

To be sure, the literature on various aspects of African American women's religious history and experiences has grown in the two decades since I first taught that course.[7] Scholars have added considerable depth and texture to the historical narrative, most notably with regard to black women's religious experiences in Protestant contexts, addressing such themes as religious leadership, institution building, cultural production, and community activism. While there remains much work to do to render more fully the vibrancy of African American women's religious lives, particularly outside the orbit of Protestant Christianity and in light of the diversity that historical and recent immigration has produced among blacks in the United States, we have ample, rich, and significant stories available. Consequently, any claim that lack of sources prevents the inclusion of women in the narrative rings false.[8] In fact, to some extent, figures like Jarena Lee, Maria W. Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer have made their way into general texts and survey courses on African American religious history.[9] That some scholars have begun to examine the contributions of such women in the context

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of the broader sweep of African American religious history has helped to undermine the sense that men have been, are, and should be the sole religious actors of significance.

While representation of women in many of the stories scholars tell about African American religious history is a welcome development, attention to women's contributions and experiences can and should lead to much more profound transformations of the field. When we place black women at the center of our narratives, we surely reveal a great deal more about African American religious history than a sole focus on men provides.[10] But what if we mobilized African American women's religious history and placed it at the center of our historical inquiry to interrogate themes and foci that structure the narrative in the most fundamental ways? Marshaling African American women's religious history in this way would allow us to cast a critical eye on the intellectual, and perhaps political and religious, assumptions that shape scholarly priorities in the field and would help chart new directions to maintain the field's vibrancy and relevance.[11] Remaining satisfied to add a few female figures alongside the men of the expected pantheon of major actors or to substitute a woman for a man to illustrate some aspect of the standard narrative is to miss the profound and significant challenges—both in the form of critique and of invitation to creativity—that feminist and women's studies can generate. The traditional histories of African American religious life have functioned as generative acts of interpretation that challenge narratives of American religious history even as they have proven to be acts of containment with respect to black women's religious histories. Of course, any process of interpretation, of creating order from the archive, necessarily neglects or rejects some interpretive paths. But we should not be complacent and imagine that the narrative as it has been fashioned represents the only available one.[12] The work that earlier generations of scholars have done to insist on the centrality of African American religious history to the broader narrative of American religious history is of profound importance.[13] Some of that same work has also had the effect, whether intentional or not, of limiting possibilities for the inclusion of African American women in either narrative. In this context, I want to address three themes that have shaped the historiography of African American religion—these involving politics, theology, and definitions of the religious—and suggest ways in which examining African American women's religious experiences opens up rich areas for research and new ways of conceiving the very shape of the field.[14]

One of the major emphases in the field has been an assessment of the ability of black religious institutions in different historical moments to advocate for African Americans in the political arena and explorations of the means by which institutions approached this goal.[15] Focus on this theme has generated a body of important scholarship on the history of the emergence of independent black churches, the organization of denominations, the involvements of black ministers in political organizing within black communities and in electoral politics, and the development of church-related economic enterprises.[16] Through the traditional framing of the political functions of black churches as involving male religious leaders mobilizing congregants to engage the institutions of American society, scholars have produced vital literature outlining the intersections of African American religion and politics across the long black freedom movement. Such a focus is understandable, given the importance of religious ideas and institutions in the structure of American racism and the prominence of African American organized religious life in countering white supremacy. Indeed, black Protestant clergy have been significant figures in representing black political interests in the United States. The tendency in the scholarship to focus especially on black churches as the primary venues for organizing political work and their clergy as key actors, however, marginalizes women's work almost by necessity because many churches and denominations have historically restricted women's access to ordination. Attention to women's conventions, missionary societies, and other church-sponsored women's organizations, as well as to black sisters in Catholic religious orders, would certainly complicate this picture, but additional approaches that range beyond church denominations would help to raise new questions about the connections between religion and politics in African American life. This is not to deny or displace the significance of work achieved through the public, political work of male clergy but to suggest that in attending to other sites of work for social change—sites created by women—we might uncover additional, alternative political values that, in having moved others to act, merit scholarly attention.

Beginning with women at the center might yield alternative and culturally powerful conceptions of community, formulations of the political itself, and strategies for political action. Turning to such arenas for religious, political, and other work as para-church organizations like the YWCA or Church Women United (formerly United Church Women) and a host of local and regional groups reveals black women engaged in vigorous civil rights activism

grounded in Protestant commitment.[17] At times they forged alliances with white Protestant women over common goals even as they often had to press for political and social transformation within the bounds of those alliances.[18] The interdenominational settings liberated women from leadership constraints within the very denominations to which they retained religious commitments. If we take theology and polity to be important factors in the construction of the category of leadership in religious settings and, in many cases, interacting with race, gender, class, and sexuality to shape access to leadership, we need also to consider what sorts of modes of religious leadership black women developed in these interdenominational para-church contexts. In addition to examining the work of black women in interdenominational groups, scholars of African American religious history would do well to return to the history of the club movement and other social reform organizations. Although organizations like the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs and the National Council of Negro Women have generally been taken to be secular enterprises, their goals and strategies were shaped, in part, by the priorities of those participants who brought religious commitments into their work. Recognizing these sensibilities at play in putatively secular groups reveals new dimensions of the histories of such organizations and makes it possible to bring them fully into the narrative of African American religious history.[19]

Bringing women to the fore as theological thinkers in our narratives of African American religious history would alter our sense of the sites of these theologies as well as that of the modes in which they are produced. The traditional narratives have been built primarily on texts by men that announce themselves as theological works. Women have, to be sure, participated in this tradition of theological writing, penning treatises, sermons, and spiritual narratives.[20] However, turning to other sorts of sources for theological discourse in which women have tended to participate more actively broadens our sense of how theologies are produced and lived in everyday life. Some of the richest and most exciting sources for making this shift lie in the arts and in material culture. The sites from which African American women have produced theological reflections include sources as varied and as impressive as the Bible quilts that women like Harriet Powers made, women's poetry published in the *A.M.E. Church Review* and the *Moorish Voice*, and choral conductor and composer Eva Jessye's oratorios that combined biblical text and spirituals, the visionary art of Sister Gertrude Morgan, the films of Julie Dash, and the contemporary art of Betye Saar and Alison Saar.[21] To be sure, scholars have examined

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women's contributions to African American religious culture through gospel music, but as with the women engaging in the other types of cultural production mentioned above, gospel singers have rarely been incorporated into the overwhelmingly politically oriented narratives of African American religious culture.[22] In the prevailing hierarchy of religious significance in the historiography of African American religious studies, scholars have tended to give priority to political activity as more significant and socially transformative than cultural production. In a discussion of African American women's quilting, Elsa Barkley Brown encourages scholars to resist bifurcating culture and politics. She writes, "Culture in the largest sense is, after all, a resource that provides the context in which people perceive their social world. Perceptions of alternatives in the social structure take place only within a framework defined by the patterns and rhythms of that particular culture. . . . A people's cultural aesthetic is not different from their economic or political aesthetic; it is just visible to us in different form. Elements of material culture, such as quilting, are in fact illustrative of a particular way of seeing, of ordering the world."[23] When scholars in the field of African American religious history have engaged black women's cultural work, they have tended to acknowledge them as cultural innovators but have seen them less as theological thinkers than as conduits of established theological discourses. Valuing these types of sources as significant for our understanding of African Americans' theological thinking and lived theology, as well as political theorizing, would not only make it possible to bring the questions and concerns that drive these women's cultural production to the center of the narrative but would also open up new ways of thinking about black men's theological work in the arts.

The traditional approaches to the two grounding themes in African American religious history that I have highlighted thus—politics and locations and modes of theological thinking —are all tightly bound up in what seems to me a sense in the historiography of the inevitability of particular forms of Protestant commitment among African Americans. Certainly the overwhelming scholarly focus on black Protestant churches stems from the fact that the majority of African Americans who are religiously affiliated have connections to black Protestant churches. Thus, in order to develop a sense of major themes and trends in African American religious history, we must attend to those theological and institutional contexts that have shaped the experiences of the majority. However, the fact that Protestant forms historically have dominated the African American religious landscape should not lead scholars to ignore

religious diversity among African Americans. There is literature available on black Catholics in the United States, and Islam has received some scholarly attention, in part, because it conforms to the political thrust of the traditional narrative, but we must cast our nets more widely if we are to account for the full diversity of black religious life.[24] Needless to say, much more research is needed in general on African American participation in Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, "new religious movements," African and Afro-Caribbean traditions, and New Thought traditions, among others.[25]

The explicit or implicit move to make African American religion and Protestantism coterminous has had important implications for the sorts of questions scholars have asked and the kinds of sources they have evaluated as useful and significant, which, in turn, contributes to the marginalization of the history of women who carried out their religious lives outside of Protestant institutions. Greater scholarly openness to investigating the histories of black figures who do not conform easily to the parameters of orthodox black Protestantism and yet who brought spiritual sensibilities or critiques of religion to their work as public figures would enrich the field.[26] Figures like Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Mary McLeod Bethune, Hattie McDaniel, Ella Baker, Septima Clark, Constance Baker Motley, Faye Wattleton, and Oprah Winfrey, among a host of others, merit attention as contributors to African American religious history.[27]

Finally, the field would benefit from attention to non–institutionally based expressions such as midwifery and other healing practices in which women have been active.[28] Prioritizing women's embodied spirituality would call forth a compelling set of questions about the body as a site of religious experience and expression that would open up avenues for scholarship beyond the traditional focus on institutions.[29] Moreover, attention to embodied spirituality in different historical contexts would allow for attention to the much understudied topic of religion and sexuality in African American religious history.[30] In addition to the avenues for historical research that foregrounding women's religious histories, experiences, and expressions will open up for the study of African American religious history, the field would benefit from attention to the insights of gender studies. Much of the literature on African American women's religious experiences is attentive to the ways in which different religious contexts contribute to the construction of ideas about femininity and to the relations of power between men and women that these norms facilitate. However, as of yet comparatively little scholarship in African American

religious history interrogates the production of masculinities.[31] Attending to religion and masculinities, an important line of scholarly inquiry in its own right, would also be a useful way to integrate the religious history of African American men and women.

In looking to the future of scholarship in African American religious history, our goals should include bringing African American women into our broad narratives in a way that recognizes fully the challenges that exploring women's experiences pose to the field. These challenges include both embracing women's historians' critique of the traditional narratives as well as responding to the ways that the unique sources and questions that arise from women's history call us to more creative and relevant scholarship. Such an approach would not relegate men to the margins of the story, as women had been for so long, but enliven the field and open up new avenues for scholarly research in general. A body of exciting and significant scholarship on African American women and religion has emerged in the twenty years since I taught that seminar on black women and religion in which I questioned the critical raison d'être of the course. Indeed, I have taught it numerous times since in a variety of forms, both comparative and focused exclusively on the United States, and have found it difficult to include everything I would like to read with my students in one semester. Unfortunately, what has not changed significantly over the course of those years is my answer to how the broader scholarship on African American religious history attends to women and gender. My hope for the future of the field is that the next generations of students studying African American religious history will have the benefit of a large body of work in which African American women's religious experiences and expressions can set the terms of inquiry as easily as those of men. Uncharted routes will no doubt emerge, and we should embark on them with eagerness.

Notes

1. Margaret Walker, *For My People* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1942), 25. I am grateful to Timea K. Széll for her careful reading of and challenging comments on this piece.
2. Clifford writes, "During the course of this work, *travel* emerged as an increasingly complex range of experiences: practices of crossing and interaction that troubled the localism of many common assumptions about culture. In these assumptions authentic social existence is, or should be, centered in circumscribed places—like

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the gardens where the word 'culture' derived its European meanings. Dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always preceded routes. But what would happen, I began to ask, if travel were untethered, seen as a complex and pervasive spectrum of human experiences? Practices of displacement might emerge as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than as their simple transfer or extension.... Virtually everywhere one looks, the processes of human movement and encounter are long-established and complex. Cultural centers, discrete regions and territories, do not exist prior to contacts, but are sustained through them, appropriating and disciplining the restless movements of people and things." James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

3. I first read both of these in the undergraduate course "Religion in Racially-Stratified Societies" taught at Barnard College by Robert Baum, a historian of religions in Africa.
4. Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Religious Cults of the Urban North*, Foreword by Barbara Dianne Savage (1944; repr. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 96–98. For a recent treatment of the scholarly contours of these discourses in the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); and on constructions of black religiosity in popular culture, see Judith Weisenfeld, *Hollywood Be Thy Name: African American Religion in American Film, 1929–1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). See also Kathryn Lofton, "The Perpetual Primitive in African American Religious Historiography," in Edward E. Curtis IV and Danielle Brune Sigler, eds, *The New Black Gods: Arthur Huff Fauset and the Study of African American Religions* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 171–191.
5. A few of the many such works include: Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Random House, 1983); Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Yvonne Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Stephan Palmié, *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002); and Paul Christopher Johnson, *Diaspora Conversions: Black Carib Religion and the Recovery of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).
6. Black feminist theologians from the 1970s on have challenged male theologians in the black theology movement on questions of women and gender. In a 1979 essay, Jacqueline Grant writes, "In examining black theology, it is necessary to make one of two assumptions: (1) either black women have no place in the enterprise, or (2) black men are capable of speaking for us. Both of these assumptions are false and need to be discarded." Jacqueline Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman,"

in Gayraud S. Wilmore and James Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), 420.

7. The anthology *This Far by Faith: Readings in African American Women's Religious Biography* (New York: Routledge, 1995), which I coedited with Richard Newman, grew out of teaching that course over a number of years. Some of the works that have influenced me in my teaching and research include Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010); Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Martha S. Jones, *All Bound Up Together: The Woman Question in African American Public Culture, 1830–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Jon Sensbach, *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006); Carolyn M. Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Marla F. Frederick, *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Diane Batts Morrow, *Persons of Color and Religious at the Same Time: The Oblate Sisters of Providence, 1828–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2001); Carla L. Peterson, *"Doers of the Word": African American Women Speakers and Writers in the North (1830–1880)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press,1994).
8. Moreover, in addition to numerous excellent monographs now available, published collections of primary sources have made materials easily accessible. These include Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder: Black Women Preachers and their Sermons, 1850–1979* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997); and Marcia Y. Riggs and Barbara Holmes, eds., *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997). Many of the oral histories in Ruth Edmonds Hill, ed., *The Black Women Oral History Project* (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1991), address religion. Several of the volumes in the Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers, published by Oxford University Press, contain religious narratives. Marilyn Richardson, *Black Women and Religion: A Bibliography* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980), is a rich resource to which I find myself returning on a regular basis.
9. In their selections for *African-American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), editors Eddie S. Glaude Jr. and Cornel West attend to issues related to women, gender, and sexuality. Similarly, in *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2011), Paul Harvey integrates discussion of African American women's experiences and contributions into his overall narrative. However, the trend toward inclusion is not universal. For example, in the primary school textbook, *African American Religious Leaders* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2008), edited by Jim

Haskins and Kathleen Benson, of the twenty-five leaders profiled, only four are women: Sojourner Truth, Maria W. Stewart, Vashti Murphy McKenzie and Renita J. Weems. Moreover, many anthologies and edited collections often include the women's voices and religious experiences in relation to the late twentieth-century emergence of womanist theology and do not attend to historical issues.

10. As R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage write, "Recentering women in a study of diasporic religions reveals the extensive cultural and political work of black women in transnational settings. Predictably, we find women keeping faith alive and sustaining ritual and spiritual communities in concrete, daily acts." R. Marie Griffith and Barbara Dianne Savage, *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), xii–xiv.
11. Historians of African American women have made this argument broadly in many ways. See, for example, Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Site: Black Women and the Reconstruction of American History* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1994). In calling for this sort of approach to African American *religious* history, I am influenced by Ann Braude's essay, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," in which she argues that a commonly accepted narrative of American religious history focusing on the decreasing influence of religion in American society and the path toward secularization becomes transformed into one of vibrancy when we place women at the center of the narrative. Highlighting the "influential motifs" of "declension, feminization, and secularization," Braude notes that "their popularity as organizing ideas seems to reveal more about historians' and churchmens' anxieties about the role of religion in American society, anxieties closely tied to women's numerical dominance in churches, synagogues, and temples." When we shift our focus from men to women, she demonstrates, the story is no longer one of decline but of "the increasing vigor of women's religious lives and roles." Ann Braude, "Women's History *Is* American Religious History," in Thomas A. Tweed, ed., *Retelling U.S. Religious History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 87. In her introduction to the edited collection *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past*, Catherine Brekus frames the project, writing that the volume's contributors have "tried to answer the same simple and yet revolutionary question: What difference does it make to include women in our narratives of American religious history?" Catherine Brekus, ed., *The Religious History of American Women: Reimagining the Past* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1.
12. Jacques Derrida writes, "The archive has always been a *pledge*, and like every pledge, a token of the future" and "as much and more than a thing of the past, before such a thing, the archive should *call into question* the coming of the future." Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995), 18, 25.
13. For an important and influential theoretical statement on the place of African American religious history in American religious history, see David W. Wills, "The Central Theme of American Religious History: Pluralism, Puritanism, and the Encounter of Black and White," *Religion and Intellectual Life* 5 (Fall 1987): 30–41.

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14. Obviously, there are additional themes that have framed the historiography as well as other ways than those I propose for black women's religious history to reshape the field, but I have selected only a small set for the purposes of this essay. It should also be noted that I am not arguing that *only* by turning to women's religious history is it possible to make the conceptual shifts I propose. However, the limitations that attend simply adding women to the existing narratives requires that we call into question the assumptions behind those narratives when we place women at the center.
15. Barbara Savage has reviewed the history of black religious leaders and intellectuals' perspectives on whether and how black churches could be productive agents in the quest for racial justice in the United States in *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).
16. See, for example, John Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875–1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Albert G. Miller, *Elevating the Race: Theophilus G. Steward, Black Theology, and the Making of an African American Civil Society, 1865–1924* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 2000); Lawrence S. Little, *Disciples of Liberty; The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Age of Imperialism, 1884–1916* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2000); Eddie S. Glaude, *Exodus!: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); and many others.
17. On black women in the YWCA, see Nancy Marie Robertson, *Christian Sisterhood, Race Relations, and the YWCA, 1906–1946* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007); Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905–1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997). On United Church Women, see Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, chapter 7; Martha Lee Wiggins, "United Church Women: 'A Constant Drip of Water Will Wear a Hole in Iron': The Ecumenical Struggle of Church Women to Unite Across Race and Shape the Civil Rights Century" (Ph.D. diss., Union Theological Seminary, 2005); and Janine Denomme, "To End this Day of Strife": Churchwomen and the Campaign for Integration, 1920–1970" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2001). For an example of a focus on black women's work in a local context, see, for example, Betty Livingston Adams, "Fighting the Color Line in the 'Ideal Suburb': Working-class Black Women and the Politics of Christian Activism in Summit, New Jersey, 1898–1945," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2008); and Adrienne Lash Jones, *Jane Edna Hunter: A Case Study of Black Leadership, 1910–1950* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1990).
18. Indeed, we see such openness to strategic alliances with white women on the part of women in church organizations such as the Woman's Convention of the National Baptist Convention and the founders of the Women's Department of the Church of God in Christ. See Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; and Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ*.
19. Bettye Collier-Thomas explores these issues in *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, chapter 5.

20. See, for example, Collier-Thomas, ed., *Daughters of Thunder*; William L. Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).
21. On the variety of literary genres black Protestant women engaged, see Laurie Maffly-Kipp, "Writing our Way into History: Gender, Race, and the Creation of Denominational Identity," in Margaret Bendroth and Virginia Brereton, eds., *Women and Twentieth Century Protestantism* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), 165–183. On Harriet Powers, see, for example, Kyra Hicks, *This I Accomplish: Harriet Powers' Bible Quilt and Other Pieces: Quilt Histories, Exhibition Lists, Annotated Bibliography and Timeline of a Great African American Quilter* (Black Threads Press, 2009); Marie Jeanne Adams, "The Harriet Powers Pictorial Quilts," in Weisenfeld and Newman, eds., *This Far by Faith*, 21–31; Gladys-Marie Frye, "Harriet Powers: Portrait of a Black Quilter," *SAGE* 4, no. 1 (Spring 1987): 1–16. On Eva Jessye, see Judith Weisenfeld, "'Truths That Liberate the Soul': Eva Jessye and the Politics of Religious Performance," in Griffith and Savage, eds., *Women and Religion in the African Diaspora*, 222–44. On Gertrude Morgan, see William A. Fagaly, ed., *Tools of her Ministry: The Art of Sister Gertrude Morgan* (New York: American Folk Art Museum, 2004). On Betye Saar and Alison Saar, see, for example, Elizabeth Shepherd, ed., *Secrets, Dialogues, and Revelations: The Art of Betye and Alison Saar* (Los Angeles: Wight Art Gallery University of California, 1990).
22. Even the most recent and comprehensive text on African American women's religious history, Bettye Collier-Thomas's *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice*, does not attend to arts and culture.
23. Elsa Barkley Brown, "African-American Women's Quilting: A Framework for Conceptualizing and Teaching African-American Women's History," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (Summer 1989): 925–26. Womanist theologians have long argued for a broadening of the sources brought to bear for producing theological works and have turned especially to black women's fiction. See, for example, Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis, 1995) and Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).
24. On African American Catholics see, for example, Mary A. Ward, *A Mission for Justice: the History of the First African American Catholic Church in Newark, New Jersey* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002); Gary Wray McDonogh, *Black and Catholic in Savannah, Georgia* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1993); and Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroads, 1990). The literature on African Americans and Islam includes Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Rouse, *Engaged Surrender*; Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam in Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African American Islamic Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); and Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African American Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).
25. There are a number of memoirs and spiritual guides about African Americans and Buddhism, including Faith Adiele, *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist*

Nun (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004); Angel Kyodo Williams, *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace* (New York: Viking Press, 2000); and Janice Dean Willis, *Dreaming Me: An African American Woman's Spiritual Journey* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2001). See also William D. Hart, *Black Religion: Malcolm X, Julius Lester, and Jan Willis* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Scholarship on African American Jews includes John L. Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of California Press, 2005), chapter 4; Jacob Dorman, "The Black Israelites of Harlem and the Professors of African and Oriental Mystic Science in the 1920s," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2004); James E. Landing, *Black Judaism: The Story of An American Movement* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 2002); and Yvonne Chireau and Nathaniel Deutsch, eds., *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters with Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

26. Recent scholarship on W. E. B. Du Bois and religion contributes to this project. See, for example, Phil Zuckerman, ed., *Du Bois on Religion* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 2000); Edward J. Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); Edward J. Blum and Jason R. Young, eds., *The Souls of W. E. B. Du Bois: New Essays and Reflections* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2009); and Jonathon S. Kahn, *Divine Discontent: The Religious Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also Clarence E. Hardy, *James Baldwin's God: Sex, Hope, and Crisis in Black Holiness Culture* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003).
27. Some historians point the way in integrating discussions of religion into their biographical portraits and cultural analyses, including Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* (New York: Amistad, 2008); Jill Watts, *Hattie McDaniel: Black Ambition, White Hollywood* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); and Patricia A. Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
28. See, for example, Sharla M. Fett, *Working Cures: Healing, Health, and Power on Slave Plantations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Chireau, *Black Magic*; Onnie Lee Logan (as told to Katherine Clark), *Motherwit: An Alabama Midwife's Story* (New York: Plume, 1989); and *All My Babies: A Midwife's Story*, dir., George C. Stoney (Georgia Department of Public Health, 1953).
29. Attention to religion and dress is another fruitful area for discussion of religion and the body. See, for example, Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ* and Pamela Klassen, "The Robes of Womanhood: Dress and Authenticity among African American Methodist Women in the Nineteenth Century," *Religion and American Culture* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2004): 39–82.
30. Most of this work on women, religion, and embodiment and religion and sexuality is theological rather than historical. See, for example, M. Shawn Copeland,

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Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010); and Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Press, 1999). Anthony B. Pinn, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Black Theological Thought* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), is attentive to both women and gender in his discussion of embodied theology.

31. See, for example, Stacy C. Boyd, *Black Men Worshipping: Intersecting Anxieties of Race, Gender, and Christian Embodiment* (New York: Palgrave, 2011). Other texts like Pinn, *Embodiment*; Julius H. Bailey, *Around the Family Altar: Domesticity in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1865–1900* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005); and Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915–1952* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), are sensitive to constructions of gender. While not exclusively about religious life, Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: the Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900–1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), is also useful.