

# Appropriating the prophetic visions of Du Bois and Thurman: considerations for the academy

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## Resumen

La religión profética es una parte integral del Cristianismo Afroamericano. Los hombres y las mujeres negras han renunciado a las contradicciones raciales y espirituales incrustados en el tejido de la sociedad estadounidense. Han participado en crear verdaderamente una nación y un mundo democrático. Se examina el pensamiento y la influencia del erudito-activista W. E. B Du Bois para resaltar su contribución que permanece relevante al problema de la línea de color. Du Bois, junto con Howard Thurman, han sido asignados como figuras fundadas en la construcción de una espiritualidad profética cristiana que informa el compromiso de las relaciones raciales y la política racial para la academia en el siglo 21.

**Palabras claves:** *espiritualidad profética cristiana, mujeres negras, Du Bois, Howard Thurman, religión profética.*

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## Abstract

Prophetic religion is an integral part of African American Christianity. Black women and men have renounced the racial and spiritual contradictions embedded within the fabric of the U.S. society. They have participated in truly creating a democratic nation and world. The thought and influence of scholar-activist W. E. B. Du Bois is examined to highlight his still relevant contribution to the problem of the color line. Du Bois, along with Howard Thurman, are appropriated as foundational figures in the construction of a Christian prophetic spirituality that informs the engagement of race relations and race politics for the academy in the 21st century.

**Key words:** *christian prophetic spirituality, Black women, Du Bois, Howard Thurman, prophetic religion.*

## Denounced

The African American prophetic tradition includes critiques of various forms of institutional, structural, and societal injustice and oppression. In the 1800s, the prophetic witness of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vessey, and Nat Turner organized and mobilized many enslaved Africans to revolt against the evils of slavery (Wilmore, 1983). Moreover, African American “sheroes” have played invaluable leadership and prophetic roles in the struggle for racial uplift and empowerment. Ranging from such notables as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells, Mary McCleod Bethune, Nannie H. Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer, these women dared to imagine a world that affirmed their dignity and humanity (Cannon, 1988, 1995; Townsend-Gilkes, 2001; Higginbotham, 1993; Riggs, 1997; Williams, 1993). Like their male counter-parts, Black females have labored long and hard in the church, and in society to be liberated from the terrors of racism and social oppression.

Unlike the women and men previously mentioned, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963), can be considered a scholar-activist who was able to describe Black life and experience in a way that spoke critically and cosmologically in his prophetic double-consciousness theory and

ethic. After being the first Black person to receive a doctoral degree from Harvard, Du Bois published his now classic text *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) which categorically affirmed the humanity and divinity of the enslaved, displaced African. According to Hubbard (2003), a professor of English, Du Bois has influenced multiple generations of scholars from various disciplines including pastor and theologian, Howard Thurman (1899-1981). Moreover, the list can also include sociologists of religion, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya.

In this article, first, we identify how Du Bois influenced the landmark study of C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya's *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990). In addition, we will offer a different interpretation and vision for interpreting and appropriating Du Bois in Black life in general, and Black Christianity in particular. We argue that Du Bois in his double-consciousness theory actually presents a transracial vision that takes seriously the psycho-social complexity and impact of racism and symbolic whiteness without reifying the scientific fallacy of race. Even though Du Bois does not necessarily experience the depth of his resolution, his transracial vision nevertheless instills hope for moving beyond the arbitrariness of the color line.

Second, an extensive discussion of Thurman follows Du Bois' influence and trans-racial vision. It is Howard W. Thurman whom we contend offers more specific Christian spiritual and religious resources to engage the contemporary manifestations of the negation of life as a result of racism and white supremacy. Thurman's (1949/1996) *Jesus and the Disinherited* underscored Du Bois' vision of double-consciousness while giving attention to the intersection of religion/spirituality and race. It is Thurman's analysis and description of the religion of Jesus that provides categories of nonviolent resistance and symbolic death that are necessary to experiencing wholeness and life particularly for the disinherited. Third, the coping strategies and creativity of both Du Bois and Thurman are synchronized to accentuate integral facets of a prophetic response within and beyond racial identity politics. Finally, co-author Helen Easterling Williams' Christian prophetic spirituality in higher education administration is



presented to provide a brief glimpse of the redemptive possibilities for those who choose not to reify the scientific fallacy of race nor disregard the power of its social construction. Our hope is to nurture, inspire, and engage present and future generations of scholar-activists who prophetically denounce the evils of the legacy of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crowism, and new contemporary manifestations thereof while also announcing life, and an unequivocal surrender to GOD whom we experience as the creator and sustainer of life.

## Du Bois' Influence on Lincoln and Mamiya

Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya's *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990) is an extensive, comprehensive sociological analysis of the most stable, independent institution in African American culture. They provided the field of sociology of religion with a sound, robust sociological framework to interpret the phenomenon of African American religious experience. In their privileging of Black experience through religiosity, they unveiled the distinctive characteristics of the sacred and potent institution known as the Black Church. Furthermore, they debunked the myth of cultural bankruptcy of African American religion, or mere borrowing from White, Euro-American Christianity. The significant contribution of Lincoln and Mamiya can not be denied.

Prior to the 1990 publication, Harold Dean Trulear (1985-1986) had identified Lincoln's contribution to the field of sociology of religion as well as his theoretical growth in the engagement of African American religious experience. With the coauthored publication, Lincoln has helped to redeem African American religious experience that was once shackled by mere pejorative, deficit, and reductionist models. In their landmark study, they contend,

The dialectical model of the Black Church is reflective of W. E. B. Du Bois's phenomenology of consciousness, his poetic articulation of 'double-consciousness' as summarizing both the plight and potential of the African and Euro-American heritage of black people; 'two struggling souls within one dark body.' Du Bois did not provide any final resolution of

this double-consciousness, but he did recognize the need for complete freedom for African Americans in order that their human potentials could be fully realized. (p. 16)

Lincoln and Mamiya's appropriation of the double-consciousness for the Black Church exposes the negative, oppressive conditions of Black life while also exploring the redemptive possibilities that are unique to this religious institution. However, we disagree with their claim that Du Bois did not provide any resolve within his double-consciousness theoretical paradigm. Du Bois' double-consciousness theory points to a way beyond the dialectic or two-ness that entails a synthesis of sort. Moreover, this synthesis includes the healing and participation of both the oppressed and oppressor in addressing "the problem of the color line" towards the humanizing of one and all. In short, in carefully examining Du Bois's double-consciousness theory, there exists an inherent spirituality, one that refuses to acquiesce to racial injustice and oppression while simultaneously being aware of and asserting one's humanity.

Many are familiar with Du Bois' poignant articulation of the two-souls within the dark body of the African American because it has been cited on numerous occasions. For those who have not seen or heard of Du Bois' analysis of the hybrid and liminal existence of African Americans, here it is.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (pp. 2-3)



In his description, identity crisis and conflict abound as Du Bois names the struggle of the Black soul to affirm her humanity in the midst of the hostile, disdainful gaze of and by White counterparts. However, ironically, Du Bois also points to the stamina, the fortitude of the Negro as she is cognizant of the hybridity while maintaining a sense of unity. In this vein, Du Bois intimates that the duality within African American life and experience does not necessarily qualify as a psychological pathology. The fact that one is able to recognize one's humanity on one hand, and the constant attack of one's humanity on the other hand, makes an emphatic statement for life. One is not torn apart by mere acknowledgement of one's reality of having to negotiate and navigate dehumanizing forces, powers, and practices. For Du Bois, as will be presented more clearly later, this recognition is the path to becoming more fully human.

Interestingly, Du Bois mentions the twoness experienced by African Americans as being on two different trajectories with no hope of reconciliation. This observation suggests that Du Bois does not see a resolve beyond this conflict and crisis. However, he later shares his hope of moving beyond the contradiction of twoness when he asserts,

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife (the double-consciousness), –this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that the Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (p. 3)

In this less familiar quote of Du Bois, some could argue that it is the precursor to Martin Luther King's integrationalist, political ideology with the theological vision of the Beloved Community. More specifically, connections can be made to the excerpt from King's "I Have a Dream" speech that refers to being judged by the content of

one's character and not the color of one's skin. While there may be some correlations, what Du Bois says sixty years earlier is that one's humanity or sense of self is inextricably grounded in culture, national origin and reality, and not necessarily race. In short, where King may have inadvertently decontextualized persons of a darker hue skin, Du Bois does just the opposite. Notice how Du Bois discusses the American Negro as one who possesses a soul, an interiority that was seriously doubted then, and still is today by many. Moreover, the American Negro, according to Du Bois, sees the value of America in spite of its atrocious practices of colonization, slavery, and segregation. This ability to see the beauty within speaks volumes to a strong sense of culture already present within the American Negro. In other words, to self-identify as both American and Negro with the potential to Africanize America but resisting the temptation to do so clearly places the American Negro as a civilized being with a past, present, and hope for a non-racialized future in the United States.

On another level of contextualization, Du Bois discourages the American Negro from self-abnegation or the erasure of one's Negro soul. He is convinced that both Africa and America have something of substance to offer, and the American Negro can more readily contribute her part if psychosocial barriers were removed to allow greater access for her to do so.

Du Bois' vision of becoming more fully human presupposes both an awareness of and yet a nonconforming to the White gaze according to psychoanalyst and political scientist E. Victor Wolfenstein (2007). More specifically, Wolfenstein employs Ange-Marie Hancock's reference to Hannah Arendt's notion of the 'conscious pariah' by stating "such individuals, aware of their outcast status, simultaneously base themselves in it and struggle against the exclusions that define it" (p. xi). For Wolfenstein, Du Bois is one who is keenly aware of his outside status as a 'conscious pariah,' and thereby works to negate the status of the negation. In short, for Du Bois, the double-consciousness or twoness is both a problem and potential solution (Wolfenstein, 2007). The dark soul must carry the burden of the misrecognition of self in order to become a truer, integrated self. If not, the problem of



the color line maintains its destructive power over racialized bodies, souls, and relations.

This Du Boisean understanding of transcending the problem of the color line is not an easy psychosocial task. On one hand, it assumes that the problem of the color line is not necessarily a static or fixed problem. The manifestations and social constructions of race during Du Bois' time are similar to yet different from today. Therefore, the challenges of being aware of the changing complexity, construction, and manifestation of race today requires a persevering spirit and experience of healing to remain engaged in negating the negation. On the other hand, it implies that there is no such thing as onto-logical Blackness or Whiteness or Redness or Yellowness or Brownness. Racial pride that reifies a scientific fallacy must be relinquished in favor of an ontology that grounds and affirms one's humanity. Like Du Bois, Howard Thurman points the way to a psychosocial and spiritual ontology that assists in the recovery of one's humanity for those who seek to transcend the problem of the color line.

## Thurman's Spirituality of Resistance

Where Du Bois places emphasis on negating the negation, Thurman (1949/ 1996) draws attention to the analysis and development of an interiority of the disinherited that facilitates in helping her to determine her destiny even in the midst of multiple levels of oppression and displacement. Examining one's attitude towards the oppressor is essential for Thurman. If one does not deal properly with this question or until one does, he contends that "he cannot inform his environment with reference to his own life, whatever may be his preparation or pretensions" (p. 23). In being acted upon while simultaneously acting on and in one's milieu is reminiscent of Du Bois' struggle of becoming a truer self. Thurman unequivocally asserts that the denial of either the oppressor or one's oppression renders the disinherited to a perpetual state of subjugation and non self-actualization.

In drawing on the religion of Jesus, Thurman notes how Jesus, a member of a disinherited group under Roman domination, "recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external

force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them” (p. 21). Thurman raises two significant points with this declarative insight. First, the heart as the reservoir of ultimate meaning constitutes one’s center and sense of self that does not have to acquiesce to the stultifying realities of political and social disenfranchisement and humiliation. Second, this constitutive element of the humanity of the disinherited must express itself in a way that does not internalize the values of the oppressive domination system. Hence, twin hallmarks of Thurman’s interpretation of the religion of Jesus are resistance to the devastating blows of social oppression while also exter-nalizing one’s humanity.

Resistance for Thurman is “the physical, overt expression of an inner attitude” (p. 26). Although he articulates the role of armed resistance in the psyche of the disinherited and doing Jesus’ day as a form of resistance, he asserts that this was not the way of Jesus. Instead, in the midst of suffering, domination, and humiliation under the Roman imperial regime, Jesus proclaims that “the Kingdom of Heaven is in us” (p. 27). This is no sign of naiveté or a private religious remedy for coping with existential questions of life and death. Rather, it represents what Thurman calls an “authentic realism” (p. 28). In essence, Jesus was clear that the resistance was the first step to protecting one’s inner life because internal landscapes and capacities, and not merely external forces, determined one’s destiny. Within first century Palestine, according to Thurman, “it seems clear that Jesus understood the anatomy of the relationship between his people and the Romans, and he interpreted that relationship against the background of the profoundest ethical insight of his own religious faith as he had found it in the heart of the prophets of Israel” (ibid.). In this vein, Jesus points the way beyond racial degradation and dehumanization. Furthermore, Du Bois’ deep yearnings of becoming an integrated, truer self are articulated in Thurman’s recovery and reinterpretation of Jesus as one who exemplifies an ethic both within and beyond a dialectical of inherited and disinherited, oppressed and oppressor.



In a persuasive, confident, and provocative manner, Thurman asserts:

The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus. 'In him was life; and the life was the light of men.' Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them. (p. 29)

Jesus proposed values and an ensuing ethic that did not comply with the rules, borders, and orders of the domination system. In many instances, he was an outlaw to unjust laws that negated life for him and the masses of his people. He consistently crossed gender, ethnic, class, ability, and age lines and barriers that challenged the status quo. Consequently, he was able to project a deeper vision of human relations that invited the disinherited to participate as social agents and determiners of their destinies. As actors according to values of a different realm than Caesar's — the kingdom of God, they disrupted the death dealing blows inflicted by the Roman Empire.

The concept of the kingdom of God has many different theological connotations. Thurman's interpretation of the phrase within the religion of Jesus carried the meaning of the presence and power of God abiding within a person that contributed to the development of one's interior structures to engage the world as subject. Sociologists Bryant and Henry (2006) refer to Thurman's reference of the inner presence as "*a priori* residue of God-meaning" (p. 6) that is integral to helping one find her ground of being from the Source of being. Hence, for Thurman, there is something of God in every person. Furthermore, it was this constituting self and God relationship that represented "the ultimate key to a full and unshakable experience of oneself as a human" (ibid.) that was central in Thurman's thought according to Bryant and Henry.

Because the kingdom of God was within, Jesus, according to Thurman, “projected a dream, the logic of which would give to all the needful security” (p. 35) in the midst of civil insecurity and Roman domination. In short, Jesus’ individual ethical engagement had social implications for both the disinherited and inherited. Jesus challenged them to adhere to the following ethical imperatives:

You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God.  
 You must not indulge in any deception or dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words must be Yea-Nay; anything else is evil. Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven. (ibid).

The nature of the relationship between Roman and Jew would be transformed as the Jewish masses began to act accordingly. The power to heal and be healed rested first and foremost within the disinherited.

Here, in Thurman’s interpretation and appropriation of Jesus, one sees the integration of spiritual matters with pressing social, existential issues. The kingdom of God as an internal spiritual presence is employed to address issues concerning life and death. For Thurman, like Du Bois, it was the problem of race. There was no bifurcation between the sacred and secular. Hence, when Thurman was advised by his white male professor in seminary not to concern himself with the transitory nature of social ills because his creative energy and brilliance could be far better spent on universal matters of the human spirit, Thurman “pondered the meaning of his words, and wondered what kind of response I [Thurman] could make to this man who did not know that a man and his black skin must face the ‘timeless issues of the human spirit’ together” (Thurman, 1979, p. 60).

The psychological, sociological, and spiritual phenomenology of Thurman is captured and critically examined by Bryant and Henry (2006) in *From the Pattern to Being: Howard Thurman and Africana Phenomenology*. On the psychological and sociological plane, Thurman is engaged in nurturing a self amidst the brutal forces of segregation, and the sad reality of how Christianity in the U.S. had become raced instead of Christianizing race (p. 2). Theologian J. Kameron Carter (2008) affirms this reality both then and today in



his extensive historical, theological, and anthropological analysis of how Christianity became white. For Thurman, and the other counter-narratives of Briton Hammon, Frederick Douglass, and Jarena Lee as cited in Carter, these contextual theologians constructed meaning towards the end of Christianizing or spiritualizing race. For Thurman, more specifically, Bryant and Henry (2006) note, “he focused his religious praxis on attempts at creating integrated sacred canopies [Berger’s category] in which ritually produced experiences of oneness in the Spirit would lift individuals beyond the socially inherited differences” (pp. 3-4).

## Learning from Du Bois and Thurman: Coping, Creating, and Self-Constituting

The brief overview of Du Bois and Thurman does not do justice to their life’s work and contribution. Nevertheless, what they exposed in their response to being racialized is a key to informing contemporary psychological and sociological research engaging the intersection of race, religion, and spirituality. We will review their contribution in this section in the context of psychological and sociological strategies in response to race.

Du Bois described the problem of the color-line at the beginning of the twentieth century that asserted the humanity and cosmological worldview of emancipated Africans in the U.S. (Blum, 2007). In declaring that Black folks had souls with access into the metaphysical world like their White counterparts claimed, Du Bois entered a discourse to which he was not invited to. In the process, he unveiled physical and metaphysical realities and possibilities by explicating “the spiritual world in which ten thousand thousand Americans live and strive” (p. xxxi). The descriptive eloquence in which he spoke of the sorrow and pain while also hope and healing assisted in the reconstituting of the Black self in engaging the problem of the color-line. The depth and breadth of his insight suggests that the *Souls of Black Folk* is both autobiographical and sociological (Wolfenstein, 2007).

In his phenomenological description of Black life, Du Bois encouraged his African American readers to bear the burden of the double-consciousness. According to Wolfenstein, “he [Du Bois] surrenders neither side of his cultural identity, but rather engages in the struggle to lift the Veil that renders them contradictory—to solve through social and political action the problem of the color-line” (p. 9). Here, Wolfenstein follows Du Bois’ capitalization of the term “Veil” and he [Wolfenstein] understands Du Bois to be using it to refer to “the barrier of stereotypical beliefs and oppressive practices that splits or dirempts the historical and social space of African American life” (p. 8). If the “Veil” is understood accordingly alongside Du Bois’ desire to retain both cultural identities, it is safe to say that there is no inherent contradiction between the African and United States of American cultural identities and expressions. Moreover, the twoness, duality, or hybridity was not the psychological pathology, but rather the establishment of the Veil—the horizontal and invisible line of demarcation that rendered Black Africans in the U.S. as inferior while severely limiting their access to becoming more fully human. Those who construct and abide by the scientific and social fallacy reify the ideology of White supremacy, and thereby fall prey to the illusion. Du Bois projected a new vision of what constitutes being and becoming human that could not be accomplished unless one bore the burden of the double-consciousness towards cultural integration, and the removal of the veil.

For many, bearing the burden of the double-consciousness may be too much or just clearly illogical. What good outcomes or affirming coping behaviors can emerge from such a stance? The other two alternatives, assimilation and radical isolation, are deemed by Du Bois as being insufficient in addressing the problem of the color-line (pp. 143-145). The former ethical response to the reality of the veil suppressed one’s Negro self to survive on the unfortunate terms of White supremacy, and the latter emerged as a result of “playing the game” according to the rules but still finding oneself excluded and dismissed. According to Du Bois, feelings of anger, bitterness, and rage brewed within these dark souls that could easily lead to violent retaliation, and the expression of revolt or revenge (p. 144-145). Denouncing both revolt and revenge and the insufficiency of these



ethical responses in addressing the problem of the color-line, Du Bois challenged African Americans towards a more peaceful, protracted response in hopes of contributing to the symbolic death of the veil.

The suffering that ensues to either resist or acquiesce to the problem of race is no small thing. In an endeavor to put the veil to rest, the symbolic death of the Black cultural self must be resurrected and healed. Thurman (1965) in *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* poignantly described the nature of what we call symbolic death in this lengthy quote.

The real evil of segregation is the imposition of self-rejection! It settles upon the individual a status which announces to all and sundry that he is of limited worth as a human being. It rings him round with a circle of shame and humiliation. It binds his children with a climate of no-accountness as a part of their earliest experience of the self. Thus it renders them cripples, often for the length and breadth of their days. And for this there is no forgiveness, only atonement. And only God can judge of what that atonement consists. What does it mean to grow up with a cheap self-estimate? There is a sentence I copied many years ago, the source of which I have forgotten: "We were despised so long at last we despised ourselves." (p. 24)

Falling prey to the internalization of systemic degradation is tragic yet extremely difficult to avoid. The victim becomes the victimizer that perpetuates the reification of the veil. Yet, for Thurman, in the religion of Jesus, he found a ground of hope.

As stated above, Thurman challenged the disinherited to explore one's attitude towards the oppressor. Implementing a pre-Freirean (1970, 1973) dialogical pedagogical process, Thurman problematized the problem of the color line in *Jesus and the Disinherited*. This was significant, because it allowed space for a critical analysis of one's available options in response to one's oppressor. African Americans were invited to view themselves as actors, as participants with an interior instead of being merely objectified as encoded objects. Although the violent force of oppression loomed large, it was not the

final or sole predictor of one's destiny. There was an option of a more excellent way.

One particular implication of Thurman's spirituality of resistance was that once the disinherited responded accordingly to the oppressive structures and systems, the inherited would also have an opportunity to experience their humanity. As long as the disinherited complied with the values of the oppressor they became complicit to their oppression. This is why King preached and believed that "human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted." Thurman understood Jesus to be creatively maladjusted to the Roman Empire, and was able to externalize something from deep within that disrupted the oppressed-oppressor unhealthy, dehumanizing dialectic. In the moments and movements of disorientation, the oppressor is exposed and is thereby challenged to either resist one's privileged position that is based on a scientific fallacy or continue to acquiesce to the socially constructed reality. A case in point is when Fannie Lou Hamer's plantation master discovered that she had finally registered to vote, he became enraged and kicked her off the plantation, because he stated that "we are not ready for that here in Mississippi" (Hamer, 2004). Hamer responded in a way that differentiated herself from the "we" by saying "you may not be ready for it, but I have been ready for this for a long a time" (ibid.). For those white owners, supervisors, executives, and co-workers who are ready for change, they would choose resistance to Whiteness as a way of life. Consequently, this stance would contribute to the symbolic death of the veil from the side of the privilege, and the detoxification of one's soul towards a redeemed humanity. No doubt, the suffering experienced would be severe. However, on the other hand, if the oppressor chooses not to resist, there will only emerge new, contemporary nuanced expressions of the veil in response to the disruptive moment projected by the disinherited. As long as Hamer remained in her place, she was able to exist on her master's plantation. However, in light of the proclamation of her humanity, the plantation master chose to maintain his false sense of security and superiority by kicking her off his plantation.

On many levels, Thurman redeemed Christianity in the U.S. for those who had ears to hear and courage to really walk as Jesus walked.



The colonizing, segregating, lyn-ching, and disenfranchising practices of those who claimed Jesus as the Christ presented a religion that had no apparent “good news” for the socially marginalized. Bryant and Henry assert “Thurman saw the Christian canopy as a severely damaged one that was incapable of giving to its members (particular its black members) the unshakable experiences of themselves as human beings” (p. 2). Thus, when asked by a gentleman from India, who believed Thurman to be a traitor to all dark-skinned people of the earth, about his visit as a delegate in the name of Christianity, here is part of his response “I think the religion of Jesus in its true genius offers me a promising way to work through the conflicts of a disordered world” (Thurman, 1979, p. 114). Thurman continued by stating, “I make a careful distinction between Christianity and the religion of Jesus. From my investigation and study, the religion of Jesus projected a creative solution to the pressing problem of survival for the minority of which He was a part in the Greco-Roman” (ibid.). Unfortunately, many Christians in the U.S. had betrayed its founder, Jesus, according to Thurman. The recovery of the religion of Jesus for Thurman enabled him, and those Civil Rights leaders in the 1960’s that he mentored to participate in the Spirit of a movement that empowered and affirmed, and transformed and inspired. Non-violent resistance as a continuity of the religion of Jesus and restoration of institutional Christianity provided a balm for the social, political, and economic disinherited, and thereby challenged the inherited to relinquish power that dehumanized self and others.

Thurman, like Du Bois, envisioned a world where racial politics do not hold sway over human relations and development. Yet, race as a category is not dropped or dismissed in their analysis as if the post racial era has already arrived. Neither do they seem to espouse the notion of an ontological blackness. The experience and existence of “blackness” emerges out of socially constructed contradictions that do not accurately reflect the way things ought to be. As each became increasingly aware of this painful reality, they found creative responses to retain and affirm their identities as humans first and foremost. Second, cultural integration for Du Bois and spiritual oneness for Thurman through non-violent resistance constituted the core of their psychosocial ethical aims. Third, both men saw within and beyond

the veil, and therefore attempted to live out in the mundane what they had experienced as seers or prophets. Though it is commonly known of Thurman's training and identity as a mystic (Thurman, 1979; Smith, 1981), recent works on Du Bois are beginning to acknowledge his prophetic and spiritual insight (Blum, 2007; Wolfenstein, 2007). In the end, the dialectical tension concerning race was seen as a contradiction to be resolved, or an injustice to be removed, but never as one to be eternally embraced.

A contemporary champion of moving beyond ontological blackness is religious ethicist and cultural critic, Victor Anderson. Anderson (1999, 2003) has unabashedly articulated the limitations of racial analysis when one presupposes that "blackness" is an ontological category. Mostly in response to the seminal systematic theological claims of James Cone (1969, 1970), Anderson has broadened the discourse concerning "black-ness" within theological and religious studies. More specifically, "Anderson's work has prompted the question as to whether Cone is guilty of trafficking in essentialism, or the application of fixed, one-size-fits-all notions of identity that compromise individual subjectivity" (Eppenhimer, 2006, p. 88). Cone (2000), in his revised edition of *God of the Oppressed*, acknowledged the limitations of "Blackness" but maintained it as a viable category towards Black people understanding God's liberation in the world. What is significant to note here is that there is a growing consensus among African American scholars that "blackness" as an essentialist, ontological category is limited. Fluid, malleable understandings of constructed categories such as race and gender are becoming more influential in academic research (Marti, 2008). Both Du Bois and Thurman engaged this unfortunate reality in the previous century through their critical insight, scholarship, and activism.



## A Christian Prophetic Spirituality in Action

The following poem was written by coauthor, Karen Crozier. It represents her impression of coauthor, Helen Easterling Williams in the academy. We share it with you to make more explicit connections to Du Bois and Thurman in Helen's role as an administrator in higher education.

Discipline

*Focused, persistent, accessible*

*Clearly aware of your power and authority,*

*Seamlessly moving and engaging inner and outer realities*

*Poised and patient to embark on what is next*

*Competence that did not emerge merely from texts*

*You've rightly discerned your divinely ordered steps*

*Consequently you have blazed a new trail*

*Now the time has come for it to be unveiled*

This is what Karen observed as Helen exhibited vision in moving her school through accreditation within her first year on the post in the midst of those who overtly indicated that they wanted her to fail. It is similar to some of the negative, inflammable press President Obama has received on the airwaves and internet. She commanded a presence of openness to students, faculty, colleagues, supervisors, friends, and donors alike, reminding them of her humanity, and ability to lead. Fear, anger, and bitterness were checked at the door, as she had learned to trust and lean on Jesus as Lord. Her rich prayer life became known to many as a flagship of a leader with spiritual depth and sensitivity. Yet, when specifically speaking of the atrocities and experiences of race and racism, there is another layer of Helen that is not as visible. Below is an extended response that she provided while she and Karen were focusing on a narrative inquiry project. She was responding to what reading Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* did for her.

Reading Thurman and doing the telling of my lived story and experience, I sensed would propel me to my healing in light of race relations. Thurman pens my story in such a way that equates to seeing a story on television and being able to relate

to the characters because my journey was so similar to theirs. Like a victim of abuse can watch CSI and see a victim of abuse and relate, I could in similar ways relate to Thurman being one who grew up in the South during a time of major overt oppression, experiencing life in the academy as a scholar, and also being a man of the cloth—an ordained minister, and desiring to see people of all races worshipping Jesus as Lord together. I believe on some level the desire to see that happen was so great that I had a tendency to try and overlook the events in between and tried to assume the healing between the races had already occurred in Christ Jesus because I was in Christ Jesus. But in reading Thurman's book, I realized a need for me to actually express my thoughts and feelings around the events that occurred along that journey from the time I grew up as a child picking cotton in the south until I ended up at the board room table in the academy. I thought I was healed, but I realized that I could not truly be healed until I acknowledged the pain that I experienced as one with my back against the wall needing divine succor. It's like knowing this happened, but I am going to cover it up and move to a place of love, peace, and happiness through Christ Jesus. But reading the book caused me to realize that I needed to unpack the two points in order to be truly healed. Otherwise I would be simply perpetrating a fraud and could potentially be a time bomb that would explode given the right circumstances. In the end, I could do more damage than good in the promotion of unity among God's people.

Here we find multiple manifestations of both Thurman and Du Bois. In reading Thurman, an enriched sense of self emerged that exposed her weakness and limitations. In addition, it clarified the dynamics of race relations, and the seemingly inability of institutional Christianity in the U.S. to address grave social issues as racial oppression. Her exhibition of love, patience, and peace that she refers to and that were observed by Karen, were apparently insufficient in healing unacknowledged pain, and removing of the veil. Through reading Thurman, she was able to gain distance from herself to see herself afresh. The mirror or the television screen became yet another tool



in Helen's move towards wholeness in resolving the problem of the color line. The double-consciousness of Du Bois was taken shape, a burden that was much easier than the one she had carried. Susceptible to anger, or righteous indignation some would claim, because of the suppression of the pain, she now found a more redemptive way to engage racial injustice in the academy.

Thurman and the election of Barack Obama to the office of the President of the U.S. of America marked another watershed moment in Helen's ability to see within and beyond the veil. Here is what she shared the night of November 4, 2008.

The night Obama was elected, having read Thurman's book, I was able to weep with sheer joy and understand why I was weeping. I could now remember the experiences of my "Middle Passage" from the cotton fields to the board rooms now with hope. It was very different from remembering without having Obama as President-elect. I felt safe. I felt liberty in a way that I had never felt it before. This was a watershed moment. It was safe to remember because I knew we had attained. That was the new freedom. I had the freedom to remember those new experiences. It was ok to do so because of that historical moment. I supposed prior to that I could experience it, but the end result would be that we were still in bondage. We had not experienced that level of freedom that we did that night. Because of Obama, I had a place to stop and build a memorial unto God.

Helen's ability to recover dangerous memories in the space between reading Thurman's text and Obama's election gave new meaning to her Christianity and psychosocial experience. She unleashed a river of tears that were now able to be experienced as empowering instead of merely debilitating and dreadful. In moving beyond the dialectical tension, this is the hope Du Bois saw in bearing the burden of the double-consciousness. She was able to experience a God that was sufficient to respond to racial politics and a history of disenfranchisement. Possibly, she is becoming what Thurman (1977) says about the one who suffers:

He knows that suffering, the ultimate logic of which is death in life, is a part of the living stuff of his earthly adventure. He knows that even in his own strength he never quite explores the limits of his endurance, and beyond all this there is the possibility of reinforcement of his life that transcends all the vicissitudes of his fortune and shares in a collective destiny in which God is all and in all. (pp. 84-85).

Helen points to a way of experiencing redemptive possibilities by choosing not to reify the scientific fallacy or disregard the power of its social construction. As she continues to lead and learn and experience in greater detail, life within and beyond the veil, she will exhibit greater self-constituting practices of integration and wholeness in her Christian prophetic spirituality in the academy.

## Conclusion

Unfortunately, Du Bois and Thurman will remain as pivotal prophetic visionaries as long as the problem of the color line persists. However, their rich, theoretical praxis fund creative, redemptive responses that point beyond the debilitating effects of the ever changing concept of race. For those of us who choose life instead of death, hope instead of despair, wholeness instead of fragmentation, and community instead of alienation, may we continue to announce a new way of being human within and beyond racial identity politics, and invite others to do the same.



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