Cultural Asylums and the Jungles Planted in Them:

The Exilic Condition of African American Males and the Black Church

Walter Earl Fluker

Martin Luther King, Jr. Professor of Ethical Leadership

Boston University School of Theology

Boston University School of Theology Religion Fellow Program (2010-2011)

Dedicated my nephew and niece, murdered in Cultural Asylums

Charles Lee Godbold (May 9, 1969—found February 9, 2007)

Charlestein May Godbold (May 9, 1969-May 2, 2007)

It is a strange freedom to be adrift in the world of men, to act with no accounting, to go nameless up and down the streets of other minds where no salutation greets and no sign is given to mark the place one calls one's own. –Howard Thurman, “A Strange Freedom” (1961:37-38

**Introduction**

On the morning of September 28, 2010, five African Americans, including one mother and her two-year-old son, were gunned down in Boston, in the worst shooting spree in Boston since 2005. Reporters of the Boston Globe described the gruesome scene: “The bodies of two male victims were found naked, sprawled on a side street…in one of the cities roughest sections. The woman, 21-year old…had been shot in the head, and her child, she held fatally wounded. A third male also lay naked in the area…clinging to life after attempting to flee” (Boston Globe, September, 28, 2010).

According to news accounts neighbors, families, children walking to school, local political and religious leaders were stunned, outraged and scared after the event, which probably began as a drug deal gone bad. On the day of the shootings, the Globe reported a scene of people weeping on street corners and children being hurried to school by terrified mothers, an entire neighborhood on high alert. One ten year old boy who heard six gun shots outside of his window that day, according to the Globe, exclaimed: “It puts fear in people’s hearts…Things happen but they shouldn’t happen like that” (Globe, September 28th, 2010).
Many people have expressed a desire to move from this neighborhood, but often have no way out. According to police records, there had been 14 murders in this neighborhood since January of 2010 and 32 assaults, and across Boston homicides increased about 33% by September 2010 (Globe, September 28th, 2010). Many are in disbelief that some inner-city youth have such low value of life they could murder a mother holding her baby son in her arms at point blank range. But this is the narrative of so many African American youth born in U.S. cities.¹

In the following presentation, I examine a selected cultural narrative that holds distorted cultural presentations of young black males as dangerous madmen, monkey men, and monsters. Second, I am interested in what I am calling cultural asylums and the jungles that were planted in them as a analyzing the ecology of exilic existence of many of these young men and its rootedness in habitus, history and memory. Finally, I explore spiritually liberating ways to empower young black men and the church to confront and reconstruct dominant cultural narratives that perpetuate themselves intergenerationally in theological discourse and practice.
PART I—*King Kong*: Distorted Cultural Representations of Black Males²

To be captured by a compelling narrative is to be lured into fantastic hegemonic imagining in which one perceives oneself as the beneficiary and benefactor of power.

The great warrior held his abdomen to subdue the throbbing pain. His wounds from the fight were clearly mortal as the blood oozed from his cheek down his chest. Hunched over and clearly beaten, the monster still managed to snarl at the crowd that surrounded him in his final hour. Yet, in stern defiance, the champion rose to his full stature and cried out:

I'm the police, I run shit here. You just live here. Yeah, that's right, you better walk away... 'cause I'm gonna' burn this motherfucker down. King Kong ain't got shit on me. That's right....Yeah, you can shoot me, but you can't kill me.

In this quote, Denzel Washington's character, Alonzo, in *Training Day* (2001), effectively captures the cultural portrayal of the exilic existence of black males as tragic madmen, monkeys and monsters represented by his allusion to *King Kong*. Historically, in the American context, there have been several dominant representations of Black masculinity (for instance, the *Tom*, the *Coon, Sambo* and the *Brutal Black Buck*) that shape our normative perceptions of black men and their behavior.

There were three versions of the movie, *King Kong* (1933, 1976, and 2005, respectively). An earlier film, however, provides social-historical context that gave rise to Kong’s popularity and impact on American cultural aesthetics and the distorted cultural representation of black males. *Birth of a Nation*, released in 1915, was the most
cinematically influential and racially controversial film in American history. Following on the heels of “The Fight of the Century” in which James Jeffries, “The Great White Hope” was defeated by Jack Johnson in 1910, the movie is marked by black male desire to rape white women and the reemergence of the Ku Klux Klan to protect white ideals and white purity. The year, 1915, saw a surge in the Ku Klux Klan, which “boasted some three to four million members nationwide by its mid 1920’s peak” (Bellin, 2005). Correlatively, the public lynching of black men and women rose in the 1920’s. Lynching were popular pastimes for excited crowds of white people, who would gather to watch the often emaciated black body hang in the open air. White Christian religious services were not exempt from the entertaining spectacle of lynching. Services were routinely dismissed for these holiday festivities. Billie Holiday’s rendition of Abel Meeropol’s 1936 poem, “Strange Fruit,” captures in lyric tone the lost sense of terror and the tragic character of black male exilic existence in America:

Southern trees bear strange fruit,

Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,

Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,

Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Almost three thousand lynchings took place in the United States of America between 1889 and 1933. Moreover, “rumors of rape were almost always circulated to vindicate, if not any particular act, then the more general need for lynching as a means of keeping the savage sexuality of the black ‘buck’ in check” (Bellin, 2005).

In the 1933 Kong film, a similar scene of helplessness and defiance as in the above referenced quote in the 2001 movie, Training Day, is depicted when Kong has
climbed the phallic Empire State Building and is wounded, surrounded, and still rebelliously fighting for his life. *Kong* is shot, but the planes do not kill him. *Kong* was such a cinematic triumph that the movie was remade twice—1976 and 2005—and is the subject of numerous spin-offs and spoofs. In 2008, after its initial release, the 2005 version of *King Kong* had grossed more than half a billion dollars worldwide. The film’s great success created a national debate on the presence of race in the movie. One writer, Matt Drudge, performed “a GOOGLE search using the words ‘King Kong racism’ [and] yielded 490,000 hits” (Drudge 1). More significantly, Denzel Washington’s acclaimed lines from the 2001 movie, *Training Day*, are meant to juxtapose the racial troubles of black men in white society and the perceived racist imagery that is apparent in the iconic figure of *King Kong*. Alonzo, Washington’s character is “a madman”; “a beast”; “a monkey man”; “a monster” who simultaneously represents a public spectacle and a cultural scandal.3

**Fantastic Hegemonic Imagination**

Symbolic forms such as *King Kong* shape our cultural perceptions and narratives of Black men as mad, minstrel-like and monstrous. These symbols function as authoritative cultural ideas, influencing our “social relations, distribution of goods and services, and legal practices of dispensing justice” (Bulhan, 1985). Emilie Townes comments on the subtle ways symbolic cultural forms such as *King Kong* “legitimize structural violence, rationalize institutional violence, and impersonalize personal violence.” (Bulhan, 1985). She combines Michel Foucault’s ideas of *fantasy* and
imagination with Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to invoke a theory of “fantastic hegemonic imagination” (Townes, 2006).

The fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in peoples’ lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image. This imagination conjures up worlds and their social structures that are not based on supernatural events and phantasms, but on the ordinariness of evil. It is this imagination, I argue, that helps to hold systemic structural evil in place (Townes, 2006: 21).

These caricatures “ooze from the pores of videos and magazines and television and radio and music and the pulpit” (Townes, 2006), to seep into all major American institutions, especially media, laws, religious beliefs and behaviors, but also in the minds of some black men themselves. The portrayal of black men as beasts, madmen, and savage apes are cultural productions of evil, inscribing institutional violence against black males and organizing these distorted images for the consumption by black men themselves-- in a word, they are captured by compelling narratives.
Part II—The Ecology of Cultural Asylums

To be captured by a compelling narrative is to be haunted by old ghosts that linger through time and memory, and to be captivated by its reasons, restraints and rewards.

"The day Stamp Paid saw the two backs through the window and then hurried down the steps, he believed the undecipherable language clamoring around the house was the mumbling of the black and angry dead. Very few had died in bed, like Baby Suggs, and none that he knew of, including Baby, had lived a livable life. Even the educated colored: the long-school people, the doctors, the teachers, the paper-writers and businessmen had a hard row to hoe. In addition to having to use their heads to get ahead, they had the weight of the whole race sitting there. You needed two heads for that. Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them everyone. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own . . . Meantime, the secret spread of this new kind of whitefolks' jungle was hidden, silent, except once in a while when you could hear its mumbling in places like 124." –Toni Morrison, Beloved.

Distorted cultural images and discriminatory social institutions restrict mobility, agency and imprison mental processes of some black men who brutalize themselves and other black people as well. In this section, I use the concept "cultural asylum" as a metaphor for the various contemporary institutions of social control that maintain the child/savage imagery of African American men and other marginalized groups in a market economy. In the words of Michel Foucault, these institutions (asylums for the insane, penitentiaries for criminals, and almshouses for the poor) impose a universal form, a morality, which prevails from "within" those who are "strangers" to it (Foucault,
The asylum not only exiles and punishes the madman, it teaches him to watch, punish and brutalize himself—it imposes madness. As a public spectacle and cultural scandal, black men are taught to be public performers of the guilt, shame and dread that characterize their exilic existence. “The asylum no longer punished the madman's guilt…it organized it for the madman as a consciousness of himself” (Foucault, 1964).

**Bestiality and Madness**

Integrally related to the notion of the cultural asylum are the conjoined notions of bestiality and madness. In American history, this cultural production of the bestiality of the black monkey man was also linked to **madness** (as in uncivilized) and to public spectacle. Much like Michele Foucault’s examination of the insane in his classic, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in an Age of Reason* (1964)—madness during the Middle Ages and well into the Renaissance is equated with animality or bestiality; “the animality of madness” is linked with the public performance of the monkey. The display of the insane was one of the favorite pastimes and distractions of the French bourgeoisies up until the French Revolution of 1848—“One went to see the keeper display the mad men the way the trainer at The Fair of St. Germain put the monkeys through their tricks”, (Foucault, 1964: 68). In addition the mad were allowed to exhibit the other madmen “as if it were the responsibility of madness to testify to its own nature.” (Foucault, 1964: 69) “The insane who attended these theatricals were the object of the attention of a frivolous, irresponsible and often vicious public. The bizarre attitudes of these unfortunates and their condition provoked the mocking laughter and the insulting pity of spectators.” (Foucault, 1964: 69) and became a public spectacle.
"Madness had become a thing to look at: no longer a monster inside oneself, but an animal with strange mechanisms, a bestiality from which man had long since been suppressed", Foucault, 1964: 70) which must be punished and brutalized; but it is also a public scandal “for the general delight”, Foucault, 1964: 69) as Foucault’s analysis of the Ship of Fools and its human cargo illustrates.⁹

In Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940), Chicago's citizens direct all their racial hatred directly at Bigger Thomas. They shout "Kill him! Lynch him! That black sonofabitch! Kill that black ape!". Wright’s construction of the troubled character, Bigger Thomas, was greatly influenced by a 1938 Chicago Tribune article which described a black male accused of rape and murder of a white woman (who becomes Wright’s character, Mary Dalton):

‘He looks exactly like an Ape!’ exclaimed a terrified young white girl who watched the black slayer...Though the Negro Killer’s body does not seem compactly built, he gives the impression of possessing abnormal physical strength...his lower jaw protrudes obnoxiously, reminding one of a jungle beast. His arms are long, hanging in dangling fashion to his knees. It is easy to imagine how this man, in the grip of a brain-numbing sex passion, overpowered little Mary Dalton, raped her, murdered her. . .All in all, he seems a beast utterly untouched by the softening influences of modern civilization. (Wright qtd. Bellin, italics added, 2005).

According to Foucault and Wright, bestiality was a vital dimension of madness (as in unreason) which gave rise to the incarceration of the madman in order to civilize
him—and civilization had both external and internal mechanisms (not only was the madman coerced into civilizing influences of his environment, he also was taught to watch himself and to internalize the virtues of civilization—and for his failure to do so, he was punished by the society and by himself, often more brutally than the society which imposed its sanctions and penalties—he was exiled. Simultaneously he was a public spectacle to be laughed at and derided—and this was also a cultural scandal. What happens to a soul over time that is the object of laughter and derision and who internalizes his own derision and spectacle? He becomes the derision and the spectacle simultaneously; he becomes alienated and alienating; ambiguous, marginalized and dangerous—a monster. Is he to be confined and pitied, mocked and ridiculed, hunted down and destroyed; or liberated and set free—and if set free, how?

*Memory and Counter-Memory*

Commenting on memory as a site of domination and liberation, Emilie Townes argues that memory is ideologically constructed in America in order to reinforce “the order of things.” She writes, “The imagination of U.S. culture must be deconstructed and understood for the awful impact they have on how a stereotype is shaped into ‘truth’ in the memory and in history,” (Townes, 2006). On the other hand, Townes also speaks of “counter-memory,” in which memory may “serve as a corrective to dominant sociocultural and theological portrayals of history” (Townes, 2006). Townes proposes that by listening to particular African American narratives in depth as sites of counter-memory, the “truth of proceedings that may have been too terrible to relate may nevertheless be heard” (Morrison quoted in Townes, 2006).
Townes’ memory, like Pierre Bourdieu’s *habitus* (1992), is a dialectical concept. It is culturally constructed by dominant groups, and unconsciously embodied by social actors. However, the *habitus* of social actors is not entirely fixed or static. Like counter-memory, human beings are capable of re-imagining themselves beyond dominant narratives and determinative social orders. African American men may remember, retell and relive their stories, embodying a type of “dangerous memory” or what Howard Thurman calls “an unconscious autonomy” that must be brought to the surface of awareness (Fluker, 2004).

Cornel West argues that the struggle for liberation must occur at this deeper level of memory and meaning. “He cites the foibles of structuralist and behaviorist interpretations and recommendations for those at the bottom of the social ladder. He argues that this debate ‘conceals the most basic issue now facing black America: the nihilistic threat to its very existence.’ Beyond political and economic remedies, while significant, the threat of personal meaninglessness, and worthlessness, brought about in large part by unbridled market forces and political chicanery, is the real challenge that confronts African Americans and the national community. He recommends ‘a politics of conversion’ fueled by a love ethic which has historically sustained the African American community. Important for our purpose is the identification of memory and hope as key resources in the politics of conversion” (Fluker, 2004). West writes “these modes of valuation and resistance are rooted in *subversive memory*-the best of one’s past without romantic nostalgia-and guided by a universal ethic of love” (West, 1994).
Part III—Shape-Shifting Memories within the Black Church:
Remembering, Retelling and Reliving Stories in Exile

Remembering, Retelling and Reliving the Story of the Black Church

I have written elsewhere on the need to remember, retell and relive our stories within the context of larger social-historical narratives (Fluker, 2009). It seems to me that the church’s response to the conditions that conspire against human flourishing in black male existence and its task to address the cultural distortions of minstrelsy, madness and bestiality that perpetuate structural injustice and violence in our communities ought to begin with this critical methodology. The significance of this approach of returning to memory and retrieving substantive discourse also creates space for the reframing of beliefs and assumptions, as well as learning from these experiences so that there is a continuous creative cycle of remembering, reframing and learning. In this process, values that have been the long stay of black church traditions find resonance in new contexts of meaning, and are enabled because of their “resiliency” to inform and guide congregations in discerning, deliberating and deciding on the appropriate course of actions; and in producing compelling religious-cultural narratives that are healing and empowering. The interplay/intersection between the metaphors of exodus and exile is a ripe candidate for this venture because it brings us to new place of Spirit that witnesses from the Middle.

Memories containing ideas, images, symbols and metaphors shape Black Church narratives, the ways we think about our mission and how we impact the world. In my larger work on *The Ground Has Shifted*, I explore three major guiding metaphors
that the U.S. Black Church must remember, relive and retell to correctly understand itself within the ecological structures of American society and the world. These are respectively, *From Dilemma to Diaspora: Social/Political Contexts of Black Church Practices*,

*From Exodus to Exile: Theological/Ethical Contexts of Black Church Practices*; and *From the Frying Pan to the Fire: Existential/Aesthetic Contexts of Black Church Activism*. For the sake of economy, I will not address *From Dilemma to Diaspora*, but provide a brief overview of the latter two figurations, *Exodus to Exile* and *Frying Pan to the Fire*.

Under *From The Frying Pan and the Fire*, I am also experimenting with imaginative, shape-shifting theological practices that are linked to Howard Thurman’s idea of tools of the spirit that empower us to conspire, to breathe together, to conjure new and hopefully refreshing narratives and practices for US Black Church leadership in the 21st century; and that hopefully help us to address questions of complex subjectivity, estrangement and otherness in the larger task of what constitutes human flourishing.

**From Exodus to Exile: Black Males in Exile and the Church**

This essay on the exilic condition of black male existence in the U.S. is situated in the middle of my triadic experiment with guiding metaphors; primarily within the theological and ethical contexts of black church practices and the shape-shifting transition from exodus to exile as a way to understand the idea of being captured by or being liberated from compelling narratives; in this instance, the distorted cultural productions of black males as madmen, monsters and monkeys.
A brief word is in order about this interplay of Exodus and Exile and its impact upon the captivating and captured dimensions of narratives in black church life and practice. From our earliest beginnings, Exodus has been the central paradigmatic theological and ethical statement of Black church life and practices. The metaphor of Exodus has served multiple functions in an ongoing cultural narrative “deeply anchored in themes of captivity, Exile, enslavement and deliverance.” Exodus has referred to the language of nation espoused by early nineteenth and twentieth century church leaders and activists; it marked the transition from slavery to freedom in the historical events of Emancipation and Reconstruction; it evolved into “the second Exodus” during The Great Migration which began around the First World War when large numbers of African Americans left the Southeast, mid-South and Southwest for the urban Northeast, mid-West Northern states, Canada and Southwest for “the warmth of other suns”\(^{13}\); and in the modern civil rights movement, Exodus language was a powerful metaphor of the journey to the Promised Land of full citizenship and equal opportunity.\(^{14}\)

However, as Sallie McFague (1982) reminds us, all theological metaphors are human constructions of the divine that fall short of the fullness of the divine presence. As such, the metaphors theologians draw upon to construct theologies should remain relevant to the current situation, rather than relying upon the authority of the past as if language about God were fixed (McFague, 1982). All guiding theological metaphors reveal and conceal aspects of human relation to the divine. No exception, the African American attachment to the Exodus has been helpful and harmful in the Black Church’s quest for the divine presence in history. No one can read the great orations of the African American past or listen to the spirituals without knowing that the Exodus has
played a prominent role in our thinking about liberation, God, and history. From Martin Luther King’s, “The Death of Evil on the Seashore” or “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” to James Cone’s theology, to Senator Barak Obama’s political rhetorical strategies that compared the civil rights movement to “the Moses generation and the new post-civil rights activism to “the Joshua generation – the Exodus of God’s oppressed peoples has been the basic way we have thought about narratives of liberation. Womanist theologians, on the other hand, have complicated the Exodus metaphor by introducing the idea of “wilderness” placing emphasis more on Hagar’s triple based oppression (the intersectionality of gender, race and class) than on Sara and Abraham which is closer to the theological mapping in which I am engaged.¹⁵

The Exodus motif also prevents the masses of black church folk from thinking deliberatively and historically about their present political and social predicament. Theodore Walker Jr., suggests this may be because modern interpretations of the Exodus event draw from antiquated metaphysical notions of God as an abstract authoritative author of history (Walker Jr., 2005: 25). Drawing from the process philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead (1929) and Charles Hartshorne’s (1962) neoclassical metaphysics, Walker Jr. argues that an adequate postmodern black theology would entail a relational God who struggles alongside God’s creatures in the quest for freedom. One only has to walk the streets of any major urban center or witness the increasing phenomenon of black bodies in correctional facilities around the country and see the sheer carnage of black humanity to know that there has not been a definitive historically verifiable Exodus from Egypt or Mississippi or Chicago for African Americans.
I would like to suggest some experimentation with the biblical and cultural notion “Exile” as a more appropriate mode of retelling the Church’s discourse for the present socio-political situation of African Americans. Peter Paris makes this point in his discussion of “moral agency in conflict”:

Whenever persons are rejected by society, the result is a loss of place; the result is Exile. Whenever a pattern of oppression persists from one generation to another and is firmly rooted in an ideology, the rejected ones become destined to a veritable permanent state of Exile wherein they have no sense of belonging, neither to the community nor to the territory. Since it is necessary for persons to be nourished by a communal eros in order to become fully human, an imposed Exile necessitates the formation of substitute community, and … that has been one of the major functions of the black churches. Born and reared in an alien sociopolitical context, blacks have had little hope for any sense of genuine national belonging (Paris, 1985: 59).

Exile speaks to a more world-oriented, historical picture of African American oppression in a contested post-racial world and allows black churches to take seriously their socio-historical location as agents of world history rather than passive nation-bound spectators. From Exodus to Exile, as a shape-shifting memory remembered, likewise, is a corrective to what political scientist Frederick C. Harris (1999) refers to as “the dualistic orientation of black oppositional civic culture.” Harris captures in this statement the paradoxical strivings of black leaders that combine the quest for social dignity with political activism within a parochialized theological/ethical context that colludes
against a more globalized ethic of engagement. The exilic predicament of African Americans provides fertile ground for theologizing about our relationship with other brothers and sisters in Diaspora; it also confronts us with the question of our existential and aesthetic *estrangement*; and the question of the “stranger” (maybe our other sisters and brothers from whom we have been “estranged,” especially black males in exile).

**From the Frying Pan to the Fire:**

**Existential and Aesthetic Dimension of Black Male Transformation and Church Activism**

This past, the Negro’s past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape, death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bone; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinsfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible—this past, this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity. . .

James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

How then do churches and faith-based institutions positively and constructively intervene on behalf of the young African American men without further jeopardizing their agency and humanity? What are the critical resources and methods at our disposal to address the exilic existence, which has created cultural asylums and jungles? We must begin with the anatomy of the problem and resituate it in the context of African American male agency. The passage quoted under the Ecology of Cultural Asylums, from Toni Morrison’s award winning novel, *Beloved* (1987), provides a pathway through the juxtaposition of his historical and material positionality. The inner jungle is socially
implanted through the processes of “symbolic power, *habitus*, and practices” which serve as psychosocial modes of domination and engender and perpetuate alienation from self (“the other (livable) place”). At stake is more than the captivity of consciousness of black subjects, but of the subjugating *habitus* of everyone who is “touched” by it — *And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them everyone. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made.*

Morrison, through the voyeurism of *Stamp Paid* provides an analytic window of the existential spiritual life of the discourse of these "asylums." Cultural asylums reflect spiritual estrangement and alienation. Currently, many black men are conditioned to disconnect from spiritual sources of identity and power—e.g., institutionalized religion, church, ancestors, higher self, and the divine—in their struggle for life. Cultural asylums mirror spiritual asylums where many socially isolated black men experience spiritual malnutrition, starving for spiritual resources that have been lost in a state of exile, *anomie*, loss of world and brokenness.

Morrison resituates the problematic—it is not merely a “Negro problem” or the “problem of blackness,” but an insinuation and signification on the elevation of cultural symbols to the ontological status of *creation* (the jungles are within, culturally produced by the project of whiteness) with images of demonic and fallen monsters predestined to exilic existence, a veritable hell, an eternal damnation. Hence, *monsters* see *monsters* in their victims—a type of Girardian scapegoat, “the screaming baboon lived under their own White skin” as a consciousness shaped and altered over time by *habitus* (habits,
practices, dispositions) embodied in institutions and public policy; and as a cultural production that secretes itself into history as a form of righteousness and judgment. Religion plays a legitimizing role here as guarantor and preserver of a certain morality imposed from without and internalized by the object of its gaze, but lost to memory as in “forgetfulness,” yet the trauma (the wound) remains, it returns, it oozes (Thurman, “Facist Masquerade,” 1946). The asylums, therefore, are not only historical and social but also spiritual sites of memory that demand analysis, reflection, interpretation and theological construction—perhaps a remapping of the doctrine of creation. This is a theological task.

A critical dimension of this existential theological task will be an examination of the aesthetic capacities of the body, the many colored and estranged bodies that are heirs to Somebodyness. What about the body as a somaesthetic site for pondering new and fresh approaches to Exodus/Exile among black men and women and within the Black church? What if we were to take this aesthetic/existential approach of shape-shifting, of turning seriously in respect to the shifting grounds of U.S. Black Church tradition? What would our estranged black men in exile and our churches look like if we took the shape-shifting metaphor of Exile seriously? What would be the content of our preaching and the form and shape of our liturgy and our “gesturing” to the stranger? Far from a more comfortable predicament, I am suggesting that we would be (to use an old metaphor from my mother) “jumping from the Frying pan to the Fire.” The “Fire” metaphor like “Diaspora” and “Exile” takes us beyond the temptation to quietism embodied in the metaphors of “Dilemma” (which suggests “standing still”; indecisiveness; or what Robert Michael Franklin calls “the strenuous self”)18; “Exodus” (which suggests that the liberative event
has already happened and conspires with the temptation to quietism); and the “Frying pan” (a static notion in which African Americans are seen as passive objects subjected to present social/political arrangements that act as a literal hell, a “lake of Fire burning day and night, forever and ever”). The Frying pan seems the appropriate context in which to talk about the historic ways in which we have wrestled ambiguously in Dilemma and hoped in Exodus. Turning and jumping into the Fire on the other hand takes the Black Church to a deeper dimension of a discourse and practice in cultural asylums and jungles, which is already present. Fire is far more terrifying than the Frying pan, far more dangerous, far more costly— but Fire is also purgative and shape-shifts toward what Howard Thurman called “the tools of the spirit.”

**Tools of the Spirit (Aesthetic Triggers): Style to Awaken Consciousness/ Ritual Production, and Symbols**

We must begin with what Howard Thurman called “the tools of the spirit.” In a profoundly intimate meditation on his first experience of viewing the coasts of Africa, he writes:

> From my cabin window I look out on the full moon, and the ghosts of my forefathers rise and fall with the undulating waves. Across these same waters how many years ago they came! What were the inchoate mutterings locked tight within the circle of their hearts? In the deep, heavy darkness of the foul-smelling hold of the ship, where they could not see the sky, nor hear the night noises, nor feel the warm compassion of the tribe, they held their breath against the agony. . . How does the human spirit accommodate itself to desolation? How did they? What tools of the spirit were in their hands with which to cut a path through the wilderness of their despair?
A key that helps us to gain access to Thurman’s pragmatic theological approach is the African American genius of appropriation and bodily improvisation of mood. What I have in mind here is closely related to what Theophus Smith calls “conjuring culture,” the imaginative art of taking that which is at hand, that which experience gives us and imaginatively refashioning it into creative tools.  It is a type of “spiritual bricolage,” the process of inclusion, exclusion, and reconfiguration of experience through an internal locus which seeks vindication in physical and cultural space. Enslaved Africans and many others perform this act of conjure in dance and song; through ritualistic, embodied movements and trance.

Musical expressions like Rap are expressions of conjure. According to Mark Lewis Taylor, Rap “awakens certain spiritual functions. When it brings noise, then, rap music also conjures spirit...Even the definition of conjure that most dictionaries describe as obsolete—‘to conspire,’ from conspirare (‘to breathe together’)—may be appropriate given rap music’s capacity to encode the winds of resistance that blow and sometimes swirl among people struggling to survive and flourish amid states of disorder and deadly regimentation” (Mark Lewis Taylor, 2003: 108).

Thurman suggests, in Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death, that this is what the enslaved African did with the experience of political suffering. These African singers not only experienced suffering, but actually gained entree into the heart of the experience and there performed the art of conjure. For him, this art of conjure is precisely what is at work in the thematic bent of the spirituals:

And this is the miracle of their achievement causing them to take their place alongside the great creative religious thinkers of the human race. They made a worthless life, the life of chattel property, a mere thing, a body, worth living! They yielded with abiding enthusiasm to a view of life which included all the events of
their experience without exhausting themselves in those experiences. To them this quality of life was an insistent fact because [check] of that which [was, lay] deep within them, they discovered was God, and his far-flung purposes. God was not through with them. And He was not, nor could He be, exhausted by any single experience or any series of experiences. To know Him was to live a life worthy of the loftiest meaning of life. Men [and women] in all ages and climes, slave or free, trained or untutored, who have sensed the same values, are their fellow-pilgrims who journey together with them in increasing self-realization in the quest for the city that hath foundations, whose Builder and Maker is God. (Thurman, 1975: 135-136)

Similarly, contemporary artistic expressions speak to this spiritual striving, *this endless struggle to achieve and reveal and confirm a human identity*. Religious studies scholar Anthony Pinn thinks, for example, that “at its best, perhaps rap music is a continuation of the creative manner in which meaning is made out of an absurd world by promoting a style of living through which a sense of self and community is forged in a hostile environment” (Pinn, 2003). Rap music, carrying forward elements of the earlier traditions of the sorrow songs and the blues, with complex “polyrhythmic layering,” (Taylor, 2003) repeated scratching, breaks, and pauses in the beat, is meant to create a sense of suspension and surprise in listeners (Taylor, 2005), rupturing their regimented styles of being within the cultural matrices of power which we are all adapted. This deep dialectic in rap music between the expected and unexpected (Taylor, 2003), the beat and multiple silences and rhythmic layering, between the regimented *habitus* of subjugated black mentalities and the physical breathing black body, may open up new spaces and experiences in the expansion of African American identities and consciousness (Taylor, 2003). To use Howard Thurman’s language, rap music may be an aesthetic struggle for the “sound of the genuine” in black male listeners seeking to reveal and confirm a new human identity that is more than the sum of its parts. *What*
are the aesthetic triggers that make this encounter with Spirit possible? That stimulates consciousness, returns to memory but also conjures new narratives about self and the world?

**Remembering My Story: One’s Own Working Paper**

Thurman counsels that the individual must begin with his or her “own working paper.” The “disciplining of the spirit” proceeds from the inner life or “a fluid center” which is an expression of the integrity of life itself that is emphatically spiritual and relational. For Thurman "the crucible of relationship" provides the hermeneutical key for ascertaining meaning in the various modes of existence in which one finds oneself.21 There are three questions that serve as disciplines or “tools of the spirit” that must be self-consciously engaged: identity, otherness and human flourishing.

**Conjuring Narratives about Identity**

Howard Thurman’s sermon, entitled, “Who Are You?”, based on the story of the Gerasene demoniac, is an illustration of his view of the multiple dimensions of personality and the need to discover and cultivate “a sense of wholeness” (a place one calls one’s own). He says when Jesus approached a graveyard—a madman ran out shouting and cursing, but Jesus was not afraid--the disciples were but Jesus was not. He looked the man in the eyes and simply asked the primary question in shaping authentic character—the question of identity, “Who are you, really?” “What is your name?” The man replied, “You know, that’s my whole problem. If I only knew my name . . . I am called ‘Legion’ because there are so many of us that we riot in the
streets. If I only knew this central truth of existence, I would no longer act like a man without reason—but with purpose and depth.”

Personal identity, for Thurman, is a consortium of many internalized others whom he suggests must come together and cast a unanimous vote for the sake of wholeness, integration and harmony within the self. *Otherness* is intricately bound to the formation of identity and it is therefore essential that community begins within. He speaks of this idea in many places as the integrity of the act, the place one calls one’s own, and knowing one’s name.

To be known, to be called by one's name, is to find one's place and hold it against all the hordes of hell. This is to know one's value, for one's self alone. It is to honor an act as one's very own, it is to live a life that is one's very own, it is to bow before an altar that is one's very own, it is to worship a God who is one's very own. It is a strange freedom to be adrift in the world of men, to act with no accounting, to go nameless up and down the streets of other minds where no salutation greets and no sign is given to mark the place one calls one's own.

*Conjuring New Narratives on Otherness*

Hence, the healthy sense of self is necessarily related to *the others* within self and *the others* with whom one shares the world. He also refers to this sense of self or identity as “the sound of the genuine.” He believed that “[t]here is something within every person that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine within herself...There is
something in everybody that waits and listens for the sound of the genuine in other people.” To hear this sound of the genuine, for Thurman, is to hear the voice of God.²³

Otherness and the Role of Imagination

The sound of the genuine involves imagination. For Thurman, imagination is a constituent part of the individual's nature as a self-transcendent being. Imagination becomes a veritable angelos, a messenger of God, when the individual through self-transcendence puts her/himself in another's place. Imagination, in this sense, is the agency through which empathy is realized. Through imagination, the individual is enabled to transcend her/himself and reach the other at the core of their being, at the seat of "common consciousness" (Thurman, 1961). In doing so, the other is addressed at a place beyond all that is good and evil. This, according to Thurman, is the experience of love: when an individual is addressed at the centermost place of personality, s/he experiences wholeness and harmony with the one who loves him/her. This is also the "common ground" of our relations with others:

I see you where you are striving and struggling and in light of the highest possibility of your personality, I deal with you there. My religious faith is insistent that this can be done only out of a life of devotion. I must cultivate the inner spiritual resources of my life to such a point that I can bring you to my sanctuary before his presence, until, at last, I do not know you from myself (Thurman, 1961: 24).
This concept of imagination, however, is not docetic nor is it divorced from the contingencies of life and action. Rather for Thurman, it is a return to the matter of matter (to use Luther Smith’s apt phraseology). Spirituality and social transformation are one fluid sentence in a larger narrative of the self in its quest for meaning and wholeness. This quest for integrity and authenticity is rooted in the moral imagination, which creates the context for vigorous and creative public engagement with the other.

Listening to the Other

The sound of the genuine demands listening to other. The church must learn the discipline of listening. Less proclamation and kerygma and more humility and readiness to hear the Other. Listening "signals your belief in the equality of all people, because it treats them as equal, even if you dislike their views." Moreover, "[c]ivility requires that we listen to others with knowledge of the possibility that they are right and we are wrong." (Carter, 138-139) In a meditation entitled, “Give Me the Listening Ear,” he prays:

Give me the listening ear. I seek this day the disciplined mind, the disciplined heart, the disciplined life that makes my ear the focus of attention through which I may become mindful of expressions of life foreign to my own. I seek the stimulation that lifts me out of old ruts and established habits which keep me conscious of my self, my needs, my personal interests."
For Thurman, to wait and listen for the sound of the genuine in the self and in the Other is to enter into another sphere of discourse which is primordially spiritual and imaginative. Here the reference is not to the spirituality of religion per se, but to the spirituality of the event. Indeed, spirituality is event, word-event incarnated in a language which is familiar in the common place and common sense of things, yet strange in its ability to move the hearer beyond fixated moral discourse. The sound of the genuine is first order language. Unlike story discourse embedded in second order language which is thick and descriptive, first order language is enlightening and eventful. In first order language, the emancipatory and enlightening character of narrative is disclosed, unrestricted by the abstraction of signification in the story discourse of public narratives; it translates the hearer into the sphere of possibility, connecting the past with the future. What if the church learned the discipline of listening to the middle without superimposing fixed narratives of redemption?

**Human Flourishing**

We return to the central question of our concern, the DuBoisian query, What does it feel like to be a problem? which for Thurman, does not end in pessimism and hopelessness, but with the positive assertion of identity and relationality in “the endless struggle to achieve, reveal and confirm a human identity” (“a place called one’s own”). The creative intent of human flourishing--becoming authentically human through the integrity of the act--means that the blue sky and the other (livable) place are not beyond but within. Hence, the inward journey into the implanted jungles is a continual dialogue with self and world; it is a tool of the spirit that demands the rigorous discipline of self-
criticism and self-reflexive agency that empowers one to engage culture and its many productions of evil and domination. The goal of this inward journey is to awaken to a dynamic sense of self, a center of wholeness that imagines a new future, a future not encumbered by distorted and pejorative cultural representations of self. Such a journey, for Thurman, presupposes a sense of history, as in the “long, lingering memory” that enables those trapped in cultural asylums to find community within themselves and in a community of memory (Fluker, 2005: 149).

For churches, this will mean more emphasis on religious education without diminishing the place of empowering, spirit-filled worship. The challenge of developing strategies of infusion of character, civility and community is part of the educational task of the church. Education will require the development of innovative and imaginative curricular strategies, pedagogies and practices that address the questions of cultural production of images and patterns of unconscious behaviors that are rooted in trauma; and courageous institutional leadership and support.

The proposed framework places methodological emphasis on the nodal concepts of remembering, retelling and reliving stories. Outlined below are more concrete strategies that can be customized to address churches, other religious institutions along with specific communities of discourse and practices in variable educational situations.

**Story Telling and Rituals:** Telling stories has long been recognized as an important part of healing, self-knowledge, and personal and spiritual development of our communities. Stories make claims on our minds and hearts often before we know why or how. We are drawn into a tale without permission, forethought, or desire to be
involved (Nash, 2004). The types of stories with which this approach is concerned are parabolic and mythical.

Parables are stories that highlight and create contradiction in order to reveal a truth that is otherwise hidden. Parabolic stories introduce contradiction into situations of complacent security and invite transformation by opening participants to the possibility of something new. On the other hand, myth mediates between two irreducible opposites and seeks to resolve the contradiction and paradox; myths presume the possibility of such reconciliation (Assmann, 1999; Levi-Strauss, 1963; Ricoeur, 1967). As participants are drawn into these stories, the customs, ways of thinking, and creative resolutions utilized by story characters, will be transmitted to others towards the end of creating diverse understandings of others and forming community. The stories and myths can range from contemporary film and artistic productions in rap and hip-hop, classical philosophical and literary traditions, history, current events and ancient folklore from different traditions.

Rituals are solemn rites and routine, repetition of rigorously enforced sensuous acts in the internalization of virtues, values, and virtuosities. Rituals that are appropriate to the story being told should be utilized. Participants must be given opportunity to apply their new insights to their own parables and myths. For instance, in the retelling of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, participants can be assigned the task of creating an accompanying ritual to provide sensuous articulation to the dominant themes of the story (bondage of consciousness; enlightenment and liberation, integrity, empathy, hope and respect for the other, etc.).
**Aesthetic Triggers:** In addition to story and ritual, immersion in aesthetic or artistic enterprise is a powerful stimulus to imagining alternatives. After participating in an act of artistic creation, participants view the world differently. They see the world as malleable and open to difference which triggers consciousness of difference which can be utilized as a learning resource for diversity. Examples of aesthetic triggers are rap, hip-hop, origami, mask-making, tai chi, dance, community banner-making, spoken word, poetry, fantasy, drawing, photography, painting, song writing, and drama (Rosaen, 2003; Tisdell, 2007).

**Poetry:** Through poetic formats and conventions participants are given permission to externalize their most private feelings. In a poem, participants can give voice to their wildest imaginings without fear of being criticized for their lack of rationale. Writing a poem or a letter positively reinforces forms of imaginative speculation that participants would be too embarrassed to admit to in other, more "rational" contexts (Tisdell, 2007).

**Writing:** Writing compositions or short episodes of fantasy can be extremely liberating (Lunsford & Ouzgane, 2004). These fantasies may be exercised in a straightforward projective speculation; for example, "If you were an immigrant from ______, how would you feel and what would you do to change relations in this classroom, school, community, nation, and the world?" or they may be less focused. Sometimes giving participants a single powerful word (e.g. “gay”) and asking them to put that feeling or state of being into words can be a highly provocative exercise.

**Art:** Participants who feel uncomfortable writing even private fantasies can be encouraged to depict their fantasies visually in paintings, drawings, photography or
audio-visual approaches such as tape recordings. Once the teacher has assured participants that the exercise is not a test of their artistic abilities, their imaginations are freed to explore possibilities that are new, open, and inclusive.

**Vocalization:** Community singing has long been used as a means of building some sense of group cohesion. The imaginative power and creative skill depicted in Hip Hop is a prime example. Through poetry, music and song, slaves expressed and preserved their humanity. These songs literally acted as a form of resistance to the oppressive forces working upon them. Spoken word and songwriting are important techniques for building solidarity among participants and for empowering them to transcend assumptions, beliefs, and biases against others.

**Drama:** Dramatizing commonly occurring, shared situations of diversity and difference, and how these might be acted upon, is a powerful way of releasing imaginative speculation. Improvisational theater can be very effective in dramatizing common problems, concerns, and experiences relating to diversity and culture. Role-playing not only helps individuals take the perspective of others but also brings to their consciousness some of the feelings and emotions that inform the thoughts and actions of others.

**Play:** Lastly, experiential learning games are useful supplements to strengthen diversity in learning. Extensive presentations of concepts, theories, and models will bore almost any audience. Games can provide vivid examples that will be implanted in the student’s memories for longer periods of time.

**Debriefing, Analysis and Reflection:** Crucial to all these aesthetic triggers is some form of debriefing, analysis and reflection. Debriefing by a trained educator
supplemented by journalizing is an essential element of this approach. It is important that the participants, as the creators of fantasies, songs, photographs, etc., be encouraged to reflect on the forces that inspired these activities and how they are related to character, civility and community. After imagining in fictional or dramatized form how their situations appear to others, and after hearing how others respond to these, participants may find it easier to conceive of alternative ways of discerning, deliberating and acting within diverse situations. If they have been able to imagine alternatives in poetry, fantasy, art and drama, it will be more possible to imagine alternatives in their own real lives and the treatment of others who are different. By helping participants recognize how their powers of imagination have been engaged, they will begin to realize that they possess creative, speculative capacities and that they can call on these for a variety of purposes. Once the capacity to imagine alternatives in aesthetic domains has been realized, it is but a short step to considering how this activity might be replicated in relationships with others and systems.

**Critical Thinking:** Though critical thinking is a key skill for participants, it is not often thought to use critical thinking as a preventive tool for individuals living at the nexus of complex and conflicting pressures. However, the imaginative skills that underlie critical thinking are needed by at risk participants living at the nexus of lifeworlds and systems who must negotiate public space with others.

Without these skills, participants will fail to develop: (1) confidence about their potential for changing aspects of their worlds as individuals and in collective action; (2) an appreciation for diversity, creativity, innovation and a life full of possibilities; (3) an understanding of the future as malleable, not closed and fixed; and (4) the agency to
create and re-create aspects of their personal, social and spiritual lives in pursuit of a world of diversity and change.

Critical thinking is a natural outgrowth of the healing work of story, ritual and aesthetic triggers upon the ethical centers of participants as it is the skill of imaginative speculation that produces and sustains the critical thinker. Exercises in critical thinking can serve as an appropriate vehicle for the enhancement and internalization of participants’ newly acquired imaginative skills. The three forms of critical thinking with which the proposed framework is concerned are: (1) reflective learning or reframing, (2) dialectical thinking, and (3) emancipatory learning.

**Reflective learning or reframing.** Reflective learning is the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern as in diversity and culture, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective. The outcome of reflective learning is a change in assumption about oneself and the world requiring a corresponding change in one’s behavior and relationships.

**Dialectical or nondualistic thinking.** Dialectical thinking focuses on the understanding and resolution of contradictions. Dialectical thinking is thinking which looks for, recognizes and welcomes contradictions (the other as stranger) as a stimulus for moral development.

**Emancipatory learning.** Lastly, in emancipatory learning, participants become aware of the forces that have brought them to their current situation and are empowered to take actions to change some aspect of these situations. In the case of diversity, it is important that participants *look, listen, and learn* from the other. Emancipatory learning
frees participants from personal, institutional and environmental forces that prevent them from seeing new directions, being tolerant, respectful and appreciative of difference, gaining control over aspects of their lives which appear different and strange to others, and to work for transformation of their society and their world.

As can be seen, story, ritual and the aesthetic triggers serve to spark the imaginative speculation skills that underlie these three forms of critical thinking. These aesthetic triggers not only serve to bring healing of and restoration of hope to the ethical centers of participants, but they also facilitate the creation of critical thinkers, who call into question the assumptions underlying their habitual ways of thinking and acting that promote intolerance, violence and disrespect; and examine them for accuracy and validity—ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning.

In summary, the methodological emphases of the proposed framework can serve as a critical resource and infusion strategy that:

- Transmits through storytelling the customs and ways of thinking that promote the development of the personal constructs of an ethical center: character, civility and community;
- Utilizes ritual and other aesthetic triggers to help participants interrogate and critique customs and ways of thinking that promote bigotry and xenophobia;
- Utilizes critical thinking exercises to help participants internalize imaginative skills needed to produce and sustain reflective learning, dialectic thinking and emancipatory learning;
- Facilitates their application of these skills to solve lifeworld and system problems that promote and sustain intolerance, violence, and disrespect for the other;
• Provides participants with an experience of community through which the natural
development of ethical judgment in favor of tolerance, appreciation, and
acceptance of difference is stimulated; and
• Provides concrete strategies for churches that can be customized to address
participants, teachers, administrators, corporations, non-profit organizations,
human resource departments, along with specific communities of discourse and
practices in variable educational situations.

Finally, it is our personal and collective task to assist those trapped in cultural
asylums in fashioning a way of life that is resilient, praise-worthy and liberating.
Everyone committed to this dream must find their own way of challenging and
transforming these inner and outer jungles of which we are all a part into places of
justice and peace. How might black churches, in particular, bring these tools of the
spirit to the 21st century exilic existence of young black American males where the
ground has shifted is part of my continuing work in ethical leadership.

Bibliography:

1. Alexander, Michelle The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of

2. Assmann, J. Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism
   (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999)


4. Bellin, Joshua David Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation,
   (Southern Illinois University, 2005)


18. Fluker, Walter *Ethical Leadership: the Quest for Character, Civility and Community* (Fortress, 2009)


22. Harris, Frederick C. Something Within: Religion in African American Political Activism (Oxford University Press, 1999)


30. Macmurray, John The Self As Agent (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1957)


38. Myrdal, Gunner An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, (Harper and Brothers, 1944)


40. Paris, Peter The Social Teaching of the Black Churches (Fortress Press, 1985)

41. Pinn, Anthony Understanding and Transforming the Black Church (Cascade Books, 2009)


50. Thurman, Howard "What Can I Believe In?" Typewritten manuscript, Thurman Papers, BU

51. Thurman, Howard Deep Is the Hunger, (Harper, 1951)

52. Thurman, Howard Disciplines of the Spirit, (Harper and Row, 1963)


55. Thurman, Howard "A Faith to Live By--Man," The Fellowship Church, San Francisco, 1952, Taped Recording No. 5, Thurman Papers, BU

56. Thurman, Howard "The Inner Life and World Consciousness," Thurman Papers, BU

57. Thurman, Howard "Freedom Under God," Thurman Papers, BU


59. Thurman, Howard "Who Are You?" Thurman Papers, BU


64. Thurman, Howard Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death ((Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1975)

65. Thurman, Howard Meditations of the Heart, (Beacon Press, 1953)

67. Townes, Emilie Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil, (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)


70. West, Cornell Race Matters, (Vintage Books, 1994)


72. Wright, Richard Native Son, (Harper and Brothers, 1940)


Endnotes:


The plight of young black males in America, roughly between the ages of 19-39, is objectively relayed to us in the latest national incarceration, homicide and suicide, and employment statistics. Several studies of our criminal justice system indicate that even though African Americans only account for 12-13% of the U.S. population, that somewhere between 44-50% of all prisoners in the United States are African American (Mark Lewis Taylor, 2003; The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, July 2006). For black men this situation is reaching an epidemic, in which one out of every three black men between the ages of 20-29 can expect to spend some time in prison (Mauer and Huling, 1995). Only 5.9% of white males in this age bracket will face a similar fate according to the US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (Bonczar, 2003). Much of this disparity has to do with discriminatory drug policies that punish the possession of crack cocaine with mandatory sentences at a rate of 100 to 1 for the same amount of powder cocaine (U.S. Sentencing Commission, 1995). African Americans make up 13% of all drug users but 74% of people sent to prison for drug offenses (Human Rights Watch Report, 2003). All indications are that the prison industrial complex is a $7 billion dollar business that is feeding off the lifeblood of the African American community (Mark Lewis Taylor, 2003).

Unfortunately, black male rates of unemployment paint an even dire overall picture, especially in the black underclass, of which we are concerned today. Compared to 16% of white children, nearly 45% of all black children live below the poverty line by some estimates (Hacker, 1995). This is largely due to the unemployment of black males between the ages of 16-64 in major U.S. cities. In New York City, for example 2003 census data shows that only 52% of Black males held jobs compared to 76% of white working age males (Levitan, 2004). According to the National Urban League (2006), the net worth of black families in America is about $6100 compared to the $67,000 net worth of white families (Smith, 2005).

Poverty, unemployment and high rates of incarceration, have also contributed to traumatic levels of violence among black males. Between 1976 and 2005, 46% of all homicide victims in the United States were African American, and African American male homicide rates for youth between the ages of 14-24 have
increased 78% between 2000-2007 (Fox and Swatt, 2008). Today, homicide is the leading cause of death for African American youth (National Adolescent Health Information Center, 2006), followed by “unintentional injury” and suicide. Some studies state that one out of every 21 Black men will be murdered in the US in his or her lifetime, a death rate that is twice that of U.S. soldiers in World War II (Ebony, 1996). When correlated side by side, these statistics draw a shocking image of black males living in a social environment that simulates war. These statistics describe the “jungle” in which they live, that has been planted in them and has been growing.

2 This section is deeply indebted to the research of Clinton R. Fluker, “Meet King Kong”, Mellon Fellowship Paper, Morehouse/Spelman College, May 2008.

3 Perhaps, even more important to our discussion regarding King Kong is black male portrayal in movies. In Toms, Coons, Mammies, and Bucks (2001), Donald Bogle argues that only three traditional roles were available to black males in early 20th century cinema: the Tom, the Coon, and the Brutal Black Buck. The Tom caricature is seen as “the socially acceptable negro” and the Coon as the “black buffoon” (qtd. Bernardi, 2001: 181). Both of these roles are not threatening to white people. As long as the black male is either subservient to white power, as the Tom is, or stupid, as the Coon is, there is no immediate threat posed by the black man in the film. In other words, these caricatures allow white people to personify the black man the way they prefer him to be—dumb and emasculated. However, the Brutal Black Buck is a different character entirely. The buck is threatening to white people, he is strong, sexually charged, instinctual, and loves white women. The buck represents the fears that white people associate with black men. The character Gus, played by a white man in black face in Birth of Nation, is a buck. When he sees a white woman he must have sex with her because “the mere presence of a White woman in the same room could bring him to a sexual climax” (qtd. Bernardi, 2001: 181). Bogle argues that this is a classic portrayal of the buck in that he is unable to control his urges to have sex with white women. Therefore, the buck “is easily assimilated into a rapist” because, in the mind of the white man, the black man must force a white woman to have sexual intercourse (Bernardi, 2001: 181). Bogle also argues that the animal metaphor implies “the sexual desire attributed to Black males by this representation is more appropriate to savage beasts rather than civilized human beings” (Bernardi, 2001: 181). This leads into Bernardi’s argument in Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness (2001), that black male sexuality is stereotyped in these early films as monstrous.

The sexuality attributed to Black males through this stereotype is monstrous, then, because this sexuality is represented as abnormal. Black males are represented as possessing a sex drive that is animalistic—and, thus, not appropriate to human beings—and that drive is represented as focused upon white women, thus breaking the norm against miscegenation. Unlike civilized white males, Black men are depicted as monsters rather than persons because their sexual impulses are savage and transgressive (Bernardi, 2001: 162).

Additionally, what is constructed by this stereotype of black male sexuality is a heightened value on White female beauty. Bernardi argues that according to Bogle, white men create an ideal of beauty—pale white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes—that is universal. That is to say, white female flesh is not only desired by white men, but to all men and, apparently, all species. Bernardi argues that the representational strategy employed by the filmmakers:

…amounts to a literalization of the stereotype of the black male as a sexual monster. That is, instead of using the representational metaphor of the Black man being a monster, the film substitutes and actual monster in place of the Black man, while retaining all the sexual characteristics that the racist stereotype attributes to Black men (Bernardi, 2001: 165).

4 “The fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in peoples’ lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image. This imagination conjures up worlds and their social structures that are not based supernatural events and phantasms, but on the ordinariness of evil. It is this imagination, I argue, that helps to hold systemic structural evil in place” (Townes, 2006: 21).

9 According to Jose Barchilon's intro to Madness and Civilization,

"Renaissance men developed a delightful, yet horrible way of dealing with their mad denizens: they were put on a ship and entrusted to mariners because folly, water, and sea, as everyone then "knew," had an affinity for each other. Thus, "Ship of Fools" crisscrossed the sea and canals of Europe with their comic and pathetic cargo of souls. Some of them found pleasure and even a cure in the changing surroundings, in the isolation of being cast off, while others withdrew further, became worse, or died alone and away from their families. The cities and villages which had thus rid themselves of their crazed and crazy, could now take pleasure in watching the exciting sideshow when a ship full of foreign lunatics would dock at their harbors."

10 Since mind, selfhood, and "peoplehood" are in some sense subjective entities that cannot be directly observed, any attempt to describe them, must utilize metaphor, or what it is like in the field of familiar cultural experience (Smith, 1991: 68). "Given the impossibility of direct denotation of the realm of the subjective, we inevitably fall back on metaphor, which is the language of isomorphism” (Smith, 1991: 68-69). Indeed, human beings think and live metaphorically, “understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another” (Smith, 1991: 69). This means that human persons and groups self-reflect and understand their experiences on the basis of metaphors and symbols they derive from within cultures. Although all guiding metaphors reveal and hide aspects of person or group’s identity, in hegemonic cultures, metaphors may become especially insidious and/or liberating. Indeed writing about the power of hegemonic metaphors used in scholarly geographical accounts of the African continent, Lucy Jarosz writes: “Metaphor as a way of seeing, knowing, and speaking also carries a political charge. The metaphoric identification of Africa as the Dark Continent, the Lost Continent, or the White Man’s Grave construct knowledges of the continent through metaphors which simultaneously expropriate and incorporate an ‘Other’ as an oppositional category” (Jarosz, 1992: 105).

11 Since Gunnar Myrdal’s (1995) classic study An American Dilemma, the metaphor of “Dilemma” has come to represent broad and conflicting ideologies in respect to African-American life and culture. The subtitle of Myrdal’s work, however, underscored the fundamental character of the issues at stake. He characterized the Dilemma as “The Negro Problem and Democracy.” The Negro Problem (sometimes called The Negro Question) has been the staple ideological statement defining and representing the life and place of the African in American society since slavery. The Negro Problem, formulated by all sides of the male-dominated white power elite, was “What shall we do with the Negro?”

In his meditation on “doubleness,” W. E. B. DuBois posed Dilemma as a personal/existential question: “What does it feel/like to be a problem?” that we spoke of above.

The Dilemma is hardly resolved; it still exists at the heart of African-American life and practices and has far-reaching implications for the ways in which African-American church leaders understand and participate in civic life; and how they interrogate the ghost of post-racialism. However, I want to argue that preoccupation with Dilemma is unproductive and akin to riding two horses galloping in different directions, which is a strain on the anatomy. In recent years, a number of scholars working in critical race theory, historical, literary, cultural, multicultural, and philosophical studies have addressed the problematic in other terms. More progressive critiques look at the question of Dilemma in respect to macro-economic and political variables and their relationship to cultural and aesthetic meanings; and the place of the body.
Most relevant to the purposes of our present discussion is the treatment afforded by cultural critics who ask the question of *Dilemma* as it pertains to binary oppositions in black life that grow out of adaptation to a North Atlantic aesthetic. These studies seek to understand the ways in which attachment to the heroic ideal of the European aesthete prevents and further complicates progressive critiques and strategies for agency and peoplehood. Under the title, “Autonomy in Dilemma,” Peter Paris discusses this long-standing struggle within African American communities between loyalty to faith and loyalty to the nation. The *Dilemma*, Paris informs us, is how we reconcile these contending demands for loyalty: the inclusive moral demand of faith versus the more particularized, and often self-annihilative demand of the nation. These loyalties, he suggests, “represent, respectively, theories of politics and ecclesiology that imply moral conflicts in theory and practice.” (29). Historically, we have tended not to reconcile them at all, but rather to acquiesce to the demands of the nation. Our participation in the two World Wars, the Korean and Vietnam wars (and now, Iraq and Afghanistan) are illustrations of this position. Such a posture has stymied not only our “power” within the political scenario of the United States, but has prevented the US Black Church from authentically participating in the global community.

In this sense, for the US Black church, *Dilemma* is a boundary metaphor, or what Robert Neville, in *The Truth of Broken Symbols* (1995), calls a religious symbol. According to Neville, religious symbols are complex phenomena that arise out of the imaginative engagement of persons and communities with “finite/infinite boundary conditions” in the world through the use of signs. As potential vehicles of revelations of the ultimate, these signs or symbols point beyond themselves to an infinite source, even as they remain partial, finite and “broken” by the particular cultural, social and political concerns of the subjects they embody (Neville, 1995). Analysis of the boundary metaphor of Dilemma, I would like to suggest, is the first moment in the passage toward reconstructing a new political and ecclesiological ground for the Black Church in global perspective. While *Dilemma* may have been helpful in the past, it cannot point us towards a global future where the US Black Church may fully participate in the project of human flourishing.

The second movement within the paradigm is emerging into itself: a reconstructed metaphor of Diaspora. It has always been present within African American sociopolitical and cultural discourse in the illustrious examples of the call for Pan Africanism in Robert Alexander Young, David Walker, Henry Highland Garnett, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida Barnett Wells, Martin Delaney, Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Dubois, and Malcolm X. In another tradition within the African American Christian community, it was ably articulated by the later King in his excoriation of the Vietnam War and the call for a “World House.”

“Diaspora,” in King’s perspective of a “World House,” is a shape-shifting metaphor that emerges from “Dilemma” as a way of addressing issues of identity which are not confined to nationalistic ideologies that bind one to potentially narrow visions of peoplehood. Rather “Diaspora,” in this sense, places African Americans within the world context as global citizens. It forces, for example, African American to imagine themselves beyond the confines of a particularized form of American racism. What “Diaspora” ultimately does is to give the US Black church a more appropriate paradigm and symbol from which to talk about ministry in global perspective; and it affords a prophetic position relative to the loyalty to nation motif which has in many respects prevented African Americans from more fully approximating the ideal of their faith convictions and racial/ethnic solidarity. A nagging question that accompanies this kind of thinking is “Can a complex notion of Diaspora as we have understood it in nation language and in migratory patterns of black religious and cultural practices serve as a foundation for a more radical proposal for national and global citizenship?”

Harvard cultural anthropologist Lorand Matory begins to answer this question in his work on Black Atlantic religion. Starting with the transatlantic slave trade, Matory argues that the “Black Atlantic” was the first self-conscious transnational modern community that was and is simultaneously “a geographical focus, an identity option, and a context of meaning-making, rather than a uniquely bounded, impenetrable, or overdetermining thing” (Matory, 2005: 274). In other words, the existence of the Black Atlantic has always represented an argument against modernity, nationalism and master narratives about the homogeneity of human cultures, even if this fact has been ignored in the literature on modernity, postmodernity and transnationalism (Matory, 2005).
For this reason, Matory prefers the metaphor “Black Atlantic” over “Diaspora” to refer to the ways in which passing ships carried various human cargo in multiple directions to create a multidirectional black culture. For Matory, the metaphor “African Diaspora,” “shares some of the misleading implications of the *arborescent* metaphors, insofar as the ‘diaspora’ concept suggests that homelands are to their diasporas as the past is to the present. Candomble and many other African-diasporic phenomena are not simply outgrowths of their homelands but also, and just as important, outcomes of an ongoing dialogue with a coeval homeland. African homelands and diasporas—much like Europe and its American, African, Middle Eastern, and Australian settler colonies—have engaged in a long and influential dialogue of mutual transformation” (Matory, 2005: 280-281). Instead Matory suggests borrowing from Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to describe Black Atlantic communities as co-directional entities. Deleuze and Guattari encourage the use of “rhizome metaphors that mimic the network-like roots of grasses, which unite multiple roots with multiple shoots. Deleuze and Guattari thus reject monocausal narratives, single source constructions of group history, and inattention to the multidirectional ramifications of any genealogy of events” (Matory, 2005: 280). In my understanding of shape-shifting Diaspora, I mean something similar to the rhizome approach, in which the US Black Church recognizes its multi-directional affiliations and interconnections with several roots and shoots around the globe. This metaphor is also resonant with the Black Church’s ultimate affiliation with the *God of all Creation* who has guided us beyond our Exodus from enslavement into a new global exilic reality of struggle and transnational possibility.

12 A number of scholars have begun to look more deeply into the existential and aesthetic contexts of Black Church life and activism along the lines of thinking presented here. They invite us to carefully straddle the diverse worlds of religious meaning and tradition, leaving space for a sustained conversation between black church scholars and religious humanists, which, in my opinion, may be the most difficult, yet most salient public conversation in a contested post-racial and post-American world.

Anthony Pinn’s new book, *Understanding and Transforming the Black Church*, is a prolegomenon to a larger complicated set of questions that black churches will need to rethink in light of the nagging historical problems of racialized, sexualized, genderized politics of the church and the larger culture; but more importantly he challenges scholars working in these traditions to reframe these *questions* in respect to the shifting grounds of political and social realities that *shape-shift* toward complex subjectivity, diversity, openness and inclusiveness. A critical dimension of this *shape-shifting* will involve a new aesthetic sensibility and appreciation of the body, the many colored and estranged bodies that are heirs to *Somebodiness*. Cornel West asserts, “the notion that black people are human beings is a relatively new discovery in the modern West. The idea of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity remains problematic.”

What about the body as a somaesthetic site for pondering new and fresh approaches to Dilemma/Diaspora and Exodus/Exile? I pause to reflect on a picture placed on my altar of my mother in her church usher’s uniform as a site for imaginative theological reflection on the somaesthetic. My mama took me to church two or three times a week. It was a little storefront located between a barbershop and two houses on 43rd Street in Chicago, Illinois, infamously known as “the Bucket of Blood.” A pool hall and Princess's Restaurant were located farther down the street. Across the street were a rib-joint and a tavern. The church was a sanctuary and social center that enveloped my youth from madness like an old package used to transport fragile cargo to safe quarters. It shape-shifted over time to adapt to new situations of urban reality. The building originally served as a church, then an animal hospital, and was later refashioned to accommodate black saints: mostly women, mostly migrants from Mississippi. Mama was an usher. Every Sunday she would dress up in her white uniform with a black handkerchief delicately placed over a badge that read, "Centennial M. B. Church." Mama was the proudest person alive as she greeted the congregants with an extended arm and a swift turn and escorted them to their seats. Those simple movements—the extended arm and swift turn were what Milan Kundera called “gestures of immortality”:

A gesture cannot be regarded as the expression of an individual, as his creation (because no individual is capable of creating a fully original gesture, belonging to nobody else), nor can it be regarded as that person’s instrument; on the contrary, it is gestures that use us as instruments, as their bearers and incarnations.
My mother’s body—*the outstretched arm, the swift turn* and the ritualistic garment of the usher extending hospitality to the other—is a site for reflection on the aesthetic sensibilities and an authentically human initiation of *global communitas*; they are “gestures of immortality” where the intersectionality of race, politics, economic, cultural and spiritual signs and meaning meet and transgress procriptions on complex incarnate subjectivity bound in nation language—the language of empire that simultaneously binds the US Black church to the essentialism of cultural domination residing in worn-out, ineffective metaphors of the past (Dilemma and Exodus). Is not my mother’s *outstretched arm* an invitation to share in her humanity by “facing the other” in all her/his strangeness, possibility and hope? My mother’s ritualistic performance as an usher provides entre to a global picture of “recurring incarnations” in *the swift turn* and act of “gesturing” and “facing the other” as greeters to Disaporic bodies, lost and found in the Black Atlantic Middle passage. This experience of *facing* the other reveals the deep longing and yearning to be in unity with ourselves—our Exiled and diasporic bodies—and with others from whom we are estranged. In the complexity of those grand gestures, the *outstretched arm and swift turn*, she not only faces the other, but she *turns*; the *turn* is conversion from something fixed toward something beyond, new, more, and dynamic. The act of *turning* towards the other is an act of shape shifting, of leaving the old self in order to embrace a newer dynamic self that includes a More or an Other. The swift turn points to Martin Buber’s and William James’ ideas of movement from divided self to a more integral sense of self in communion with the Other. It is a *turn* from Du Bois’ *doubtlessness* to a truer sense of self. Moreover, my mother’s ritualistic performance is a shape-shifting, signifying movement that calls on the deity Esu, the Holy Ghost to *turn*, to shift towards the other within and the other without; to signify on black figuration of language and being or what Anthony Pinn calls “a hermeneutics of style.” This is embedded in her body language; she is the great trickster, a black interpreter god, signifying on culture and calling upon us to *turn*, a Kumina dancer, incarnating the spirit of life, filled with the Holy Ghost and a Mighty Burning Fire!

What if we were to take this aesthetic/existential approach of *shape-shifting, of turning* seriously in respect to the shifting grounds of U.S. Black Church tradition? What would our churches look like if we took *shape-shifting* metaphors of Diaspora and Exile seriously? What would be the content of our preaching and the form and shape of our liturgy and our “gesturing” to the stranger? Far from a more comfortable predicament, I am suggesting that we would be *turning* (to use an old metaphor from my mother) “jumping from the Frying pan to the Fire.” The “Fire” metaphor like “Diaspora” and “Exile” takes us beyond the temptation to quietism embodied in the metaphors of “Dilemma” (which suggests “standing still”; indecisiveness; or what Robert Michael Franklin calls “the strenuous self”); “Exodus” (which suggests that the liberative event has already happened and conspires with the temptation to quietism); and the “Frying pan” (a static notion in which African Americans are seen as passive objects subjected to present social/political arrangements that act as a literal hell, a “lake of Fire burning day and night, forever and ever”). The Frying pan seems the appropriate context in which to talk about the historic ways in which we have wrestled ambiguously in Dilemma and hoped in Exodus. *Turning and jumping* into the Fire on the other hand takes the Black Church to a deeper dimension of a discourse and practice which is already present. Fire is far more terrifying than the Frying pan, far more dangerous, far more costly—but Fire is also purgative and *shape-shifts* toward what Howard Thurman called “the search for common ground.”

In respect to the shape-shifting ghost of contested post-racial discourse, let us re-imagine what it means to be bodily “baptized by Fire and the Holy Ghost.” “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost, and with fire.” (*Matt.* 3:11). Fire, as a shape-shifting metaphor, is universal and purgative. What I have in mind here is akin to Diana L. Eck’s experimentation with cross cultural and religious themes associated with The Spirit. One of the common themes that binds traditional religious cosmologies is the element of Fire as denoting Spirit (also breath, wind). African American religious discourse is anchored in practices that seek the fullness of baptism in the Spirit which is “Fire shut in our bones.” *Fire in the bones*, as Allan Boesak reminds us in his excellent collection of sermons, *The Fire Within: Sermons from the Edge of Exile* (2007), that there is indeed a place for black Jeremiahs/JSeremiads, whether here in South Africa or in the US or in the United Kingdom. Preaching in exile contexts where prophetic voices have been silenced, Black church leaders must confront their own “intensely personal” narratives,” framed
within the perplexity of their own voicelessness” in order to answer the question, “How can the one made voiceless be speaking the Word of God to others?” The confrontation between my good friend, Dr. Jeremiah Wright and then Senator Barack Obama is an example of the challenge that “Fire shut up in our bones” demand of us.

**Fire and Recurring Incarnation**

The metaphor of Fire also reminds us of the importance of the shape-shifting character of the Holy Ghost (spirit) in constructing a global theology of the African Diaspora. Womanist scholar Diane Stewart’s work on the Kumina religion, a BaKongo tradition of Central Africa that became widely practiced in Jamaica by recaptive slaves and their descendants, argues that a proper understanding of spirit for the African Diaspora, would include the notion of “recurring incarnation” (Stewart, 2004: p. 61). Rather than emphasizing men’s preoccupation with death, recurring spirit possession in these women focuses on women’s ability to give life. Stewart believes that Kumina women’s acknowledgement of the need to be in continuous touch with the spirit of the ancestors is a much more fulfilling pragmatic approach to the everyday problems Afro-Jamaican women face and provides an important critique of Christian doctrines of redemptive suffering. Through her womanist analysis of Kumina rituals of possession, Stewart thus critiques less helpful Christian doctrines and points toward a more inclusive global Diasporic theology that embraces the continual renewing power of spirit within women’s bodies, even those of different religions (Stewart, 2004: p. 61).

Indeed, the spirit of Fire demands that our commitments to the nation and to institutionalized religion in a contested post-racial world be judged by a more inclusive and prophetic norm, not unlike the tongues of Fire at Pentecost. Our commitments to the nation would be judged in the context of a greater loyalty to the world community, particularly to people of African descent, African American males in cultural asylums, and other oppressed peoples of the world: Haiti? Darfur? Tibet? Zimbabwe? Palestine? Syria? When Martin Luther King made that fateful decision to talk about a world house in which the triplets of war, poverty, and racism had to be removed, he was prophesying in tongues of Fire. This courageous vision of world community cost him dearly—some of us think with his life.

In many respects, King’s prophetic vision of the World House mirrors what we have in mind with the idea of “Fire” or reverence that sees the interrelatedness and inherent value of all life. It was his sense of community that led him to identify the great new problem of humankind as the challenge of divided loyalties: loyalty to the particularized and local visions of race, ethnicity and the state versus the demand for global community:

We have inherited a large house, a great 'world house' in which we have to live together -- black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Hindu -- a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live together with each other in peace.

For King, the remedy for this problem of loyalty was a “revolution of values and priorities.” At the heart of such a revolution (or turning) is the question of loyalty. “A genuine revolution of values means in the final analysis that our loyalties must become ecumenical rather than sectional. Every nation must now develop an overriding loyalty to mankind [sic] as a whole in order to preserve the best in our individual societies.” King suggested that this spiritual revolution would lift us beyond tribe, race, class and nation to a worldwide fellowship of love. At once, in this singular vision of reverence and possibility, King articulated the dream of the beloved community in which civilization was inspired and supported within the context of global communion. Many believe he was speaking in many languages as the Spirit gave utterance — languages that speak in loving and just ways to the agonizing, yet redemptive possibilities inherent in recognition, respectability and reverence for a beloved community more grand that even the nation and the world can ever hope for — a new heaven and a new earth.

---


Martin Luther King, Jr's final "Sermon" drew on these same themes of leading the people to, but not himself entering the promised land.

William R. Jones (1997) in what was probably the most controversial book written during the nascent days of black theology, Is God a White Racist?, challenged the appropriateness of the "Exodus metaphor" for the experiences of African American people. However historically situated, Jones argued, Exodus suggests that there has been or will be an actual, historically verifiable liberative act for Black people by the Hand of God. Jones contended that we could not point to such an act in history. I agree with Jones that the historical plight of African Americans cannot be equated with the biblical Exodus of the Hebrews, nor can we point to an eschatological event with historical certainty. The eschatological event of the future is based on the claims of a liberative Exodus event from the past. Since we cannot refer to an actual historically verifiable Exodus of the past, we risk serious error in anticipating an eschaton in which God will deliver the oppressed.

Examples of programs and interventions—Ten Point Coalition, etc

Somebodyness places emphasis on the body as a critical source for the somaesthetic/ethical life. One can hardly imagine living ethically or unethically without a body. Moreover, the body constitutes a critical frame of reference for the aesthetic life, apart from which ethics as a narrative quest is impossible. This is especially important for ethical reflection in African American life and culture. Ethics, as a discipline, not only seeks answers to questions of right and wrong, but responses to beauty, balance and symmetry which are equally significant for the moral development and deportment of leaders, in this case black church leaders. In a discussion on what he calls somaesthetics, Richard Shusterman makes the lively argument that the body is the occasion for ethical life and practices. He calls attention to a long tradition of philosophers who have made similar claims, among these being Socrates, Zeno, Aristippus, Diogenes, and more recently, Michel Foucault, F. M. Alexander, Wilhelm Reich, and Moshe Feldenkrais. Therefore, it is incumbent upon leaders to care for and develop their sensory capacities in the pursuit of ethical living. "Every man," says Thoreau, "is the builder of a temple, called his body, to the god he worships, after a style purely his own, nor can he get off by
hammering marble instead. We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. Any nobleness begins to refine a man’s features, any meanness or sensuality to imbrute them” (Richard Shusterman, “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal,” published in Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 1999, p. 57). In reflection on the "New Negro" involved in the Montgomery campaign, King wrote: “Once plagued with a tragic sense of inferiority resulting from the crippling effects of slavery and segregation, the Negro has now been driven to re-evaluate himself. He has come to feel that he is somebody. His religion reveals to him that God loves all His children and that the important thing about a man is not ‘his specificity but his fundamentum’ -- not the texture of his hair or the color of his skin but his eternal worth to God” (King, 1958: 167).

18 Examples in African-American life and history abound with this problematic variously referred to a "double consciousness," "normative gaze," and the crippling labels of intellectual and social inferiority based on race, class and gender. DuBois’s depiction of doubleness is a meditation on the psychosocial condition of the African-American at the turn of the twentieth century, but it is even more. At the core of the problematic is the plea for recognition. Recognition, respectability and loyalty were also cornerstones of racial uplift ideology that dominated the landscape of post-Reconstruction activities among black leadership. These civic goods were sought through education, suffrage, political leadership and jury service based on natural rights arguments. DuBois, W. E. B., The Souls of Black Folk, New York: Bantam Books, 1989: 45-46; and Robert Michael Franklin’s discussion on “strenuous life” in Liberating Voices: Human Fulfillment and Social Justice in African-American Thought, Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1990.


20 “Musical emotion that thrives in this interplay of expectation and surprise, through repetition and the skill of composers and players, exposes listener to changes in their physical and cultural experience. Not only is the experience of periodicity, and hence the temporal, involved, but so also a new experience of space. The listening self, through the temporal interplay between the expected and unexpected, finds the boundaries of self-changing in relation to the whole musical event and its various parts. The self is expanded, often coming into itself in a new relationships to composers and players and their creations” (Mark Lewis Taylor, 2003).