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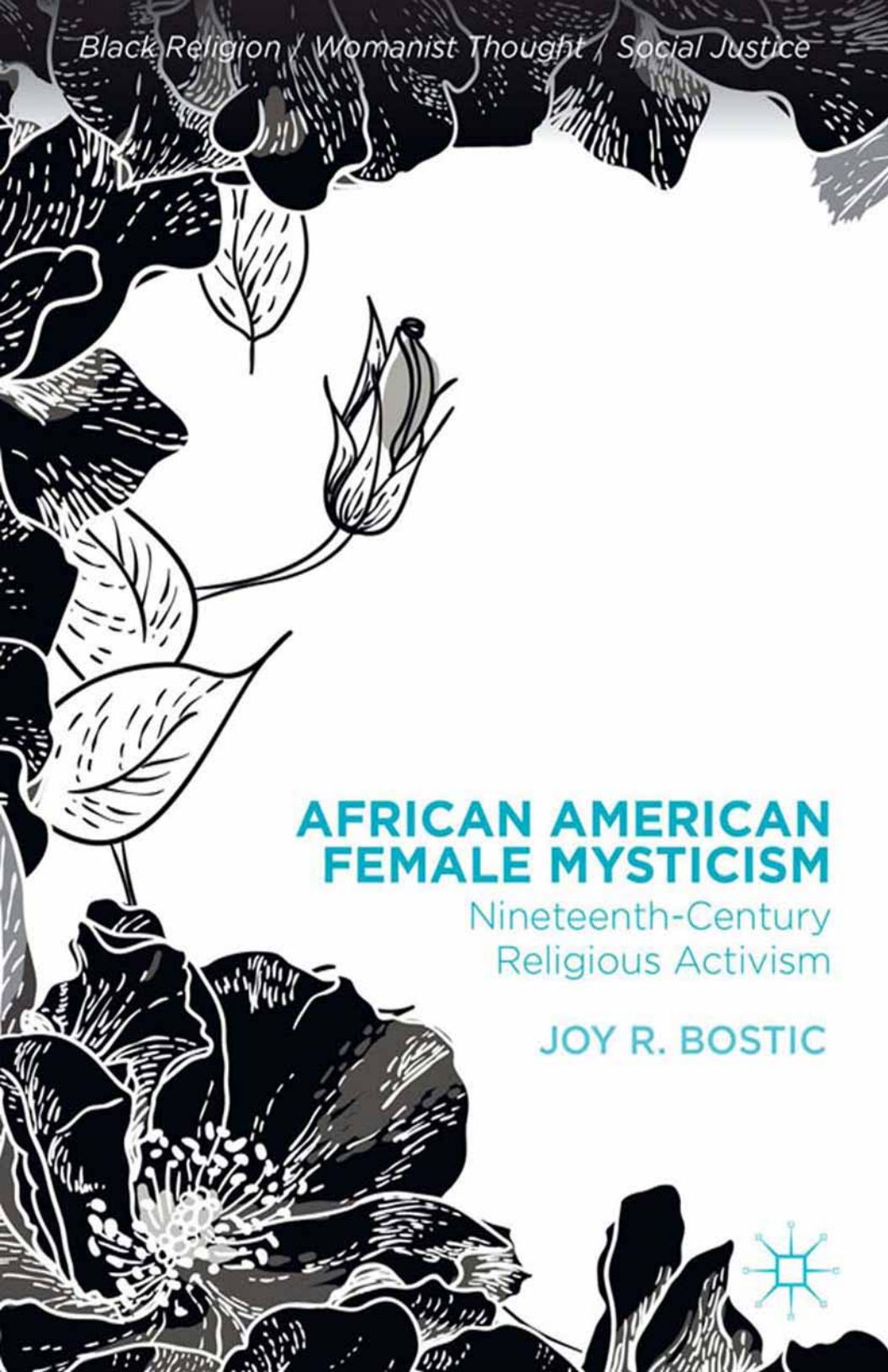

AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE MYSTICISM

Nineteenth-Century Religious Activism

JOY R. BOSTIC

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In memory of my father
James Earl Bostic Jr.

And my maternal grandmother
Mozella Hoskins

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Contents

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Introduction

It is the insistence of mysticism…that there is within reach of every [person] not only a defense against the Grand Invasion but also the energy for transforming it into community. It says that a [person] can seek deliberately to explore the inner region and resources of [her] own life.…[She] can become at home within by locating in [her] own spirit the trysting place where [she] and God may meet. Here it is that life may become private, personal, without at the same time becoming self-centered; here the little purposes that cloy may be absorbed in the big purpose that structures and redefines; here the individual comes to [herself] the wanderer comes home, and the private life is saved for deliberate involvement.[1]

Religious scholar Anthony Pinn identifies the central focus of African American religion as the struggle to construct and embody complex subjectivities.[2] The above quote by Howard Thurman speaks directly to the tension that lies at the core of this struggle—the tension between the interior, subjective life, and the exterior, social life. In order to resolve this tension African Americans have historically had to contend with two predicaments. The first is how they, as individuals and communities overwhelmed by the violence of hegemonic power, can exercise the agency to self-define in the midst of externally imposed constraints. The second involves the ways in which this creative struggle toward self-definition becomes translated into concrete action within social contexts that do not fully value black humanity.[3] For Thurman religious experience, which he equates with mystical experience, serves as a transformative space in which persons are restructured and redefined as more

deeply engaged ethical and social beings. Thus, the religious Subject, through mystical experience, solidifies a home within her own body and the ground of her own interior. At the same time, she is compelled and empowered to work against the very cultural constraints and hegemonic systems that have impinged upon her life and the lives of others. Thurman's words encapsulate the broad continuum of African American mysticism within North American experience. In this book, I specifically focus on nineteenth-century expressions of black female mysticism. Thurman's narrative and religious activism can help to provide a foundation for and an introduction to these expressions.

Born in Daytona Beach, Florida, at the turn of the twentieth century, Thurman explored the contemplative aspects of nature and community growing up as a child. Surrounded by bodies of water and forest groves, Thurman embraced a mystical view of life that incorporated natural phenomena as mediators of divinity. His spirituality was nurtured by the teachings and ethical comportments of his mother Alice and his grandmother Nancy Ambrose. Thurman's religious experience was informed by the embodied worship and communal observances of the black Baptist church he attended with his family. Influenced by the interior explorations of his youth, the moral authority of his mother and grandmother, and the religious practices of African American communities, Thurman's perspectives on mysticism incorporated complex layers of practice, experience, and agency. As a scholar and ordained minister, Thurman sought out other scholars and texts that would provide him with a theoretical framework for his understanding of mystical experience and religious praxis (for example, while a graduate student at Oberlin he studied with Quaker mystic Rufus Jones). For Thurman, it was critical that this understanding include social justice as a central commitment. As a pastor, chaplain, and mentor to then future leaders of the civil rights movement such as Martin Luther King Jr., Thurman was engaged in a socially active and ethically grounded communal life. As one who explicitly identified himself with mysticism and mystical traditions, he constantly sought to cultivate the interior and active dimensions of human existence as a seamless whole—even in the midst of fragmenting realities such as racism, discrimination, and segregation. Therefore, religious scholar Alton

Pollard uses the term "mystic-activism"[4] to refer to Thurman's combination of interiority and commitment to social justice. This description refers to "the potential of mysticism as a discomforting yet compelling and principled call to *action*."[5] Pollard argues Thurman's praxis is an example of how the mystical life compels the practitioner to act as an agent of change and social regeneration in response to "extraordinary" religious encounter. While Pollard uses the term "mystic-activism" to identify Thurman's religious orientation and praxis, I will use the term "mystical-activism" instead to refer to the religious activism of the select women studied in this work. While there are certainly nineteenth-century black women who can be formally identified as mystics, however this term may be defined, I want to explore the role that mystical *dimensions* of black female spirituality play in women's religious activism whether or not they might be classified as a such.

Pollard points to Thurman as a twentieth-century source for understanding the particular "mystic culture"[6] of African America—a culture that Pollard asserts is indebted to the African continent and the creative genius of enslaved blacks. He goes on to suggest that African Americans would greatly benefit from a greater understanding of this cultural ethos of the African diaspora.[7] The work of religious scholars Yvonne Chireau and Dianne Stewart both help to uncover this mystic culture and locate this mystical ethos within a wider spectrum of African diasporic religiosity and spirituality. Stewart identifies the various phenomena that appear on this spectrum as visitations, talents, and gifts. These gifts consist of "perceiving the realm of the invisible, reading undisclosed phenomenon, . . . communicating with spirits," and mediating mystical power.[8] Stewart and Chireau both recognize the central role that people who "possess special powers" play in the religious and social lives of African diasporic cultures.[9] Both scholars see the performance of religious gifts and powers as avenues for marginalized black people to exercise agency and construct meaning.[10] Both scholars also identify a variety of religious phenomena and practices that relate to mystical experience. These phenomena and practices include visitations, dreams, visions, conjuring, prophecy, divining, mystical travel, and healing, and serve to enable black people

to "engage in subversive activities" and oppose racial domination.[11] Given this diversity of phenomena Chireau stresses the importance of an approach to African American religion that takes seriously this "broad sphere of relief and practice." Chireau employs the term "supernaturalism" to refer to "a cluster of ideas concerning . . . agents and spiritual efficacy that includes conceptions of divinity and other spiritual forces."[12] She does so in an attempt to avoid the bifurcation of magic and religion often assumed in Western constructions of what is considered religious. For the purposes of this book I refer to this magical spirituality or supernaturalism as part of an African American mystic culture. This mystic culture includes the phenomena listed above as well as contemplative practices and other "aspects of black belief [that serve] to bring the individual and community into a transcendent experience that efface[s] the boundaries between self and spirit."[13] Chireau also recognizes the ways African classical traditions and Native American spiritualities have served as "cultural source[s]" for these practices.[14]

Thurman's articulations of religious and mystical experience draw upon this broad, dynamic tradition of African American spirituality and mystical culture as well as other religious ideas and practices that were circulating during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries within North America. Mystical experience was neither static nor wholly private for Thurman. Neither was his definition of the category. Thurman describes mystical experience as part of a three-part continuum comprising preparation, encounter, and response. In order for mystical encounter to be considered authentic, according to Thurman, the "fruits" of that encounter had to be expressed through active engagement in community. Thurman ascribes to a worldview that marries the mystical with the social in integrative and holistic ways and is in concert with a larger African American tradition of spiritualty and social activism.

It is within this larger tradition of African American spirituality and mystical culture that I locate black women's mystical activism. My interest in African American mysticism and spirituality arises out of my study of Thurman's writings and the nineteenth-century spiritual autobiographies of black women such as Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote. My work on a focus group

study I conducted in 2005 with African American female activists living and working in Harlem, New York, further piqued my curiosity regarding black female spiritual traditions. In this focus group study our discussions were centered on the ways in which the spiritual practices and beliefs of these religious and social activists informed their work with women and girls. Participants included ordained Protestant ministers, adherents of Islam, members of African Christian denominations, and Buddhist practitioners. One participant identified the writings of Howard Thurman as central to her personal devotions, one ordained woman had also taken steps to be initiated into an African American Yoruba tradition, and a Muslim woman shared how she employs diverse healing modalities from different cultural and religious traditions in her work with abused girls. When I asked the Muslim-identified woman how does she reconcile her use of healing modalities from different religious and cultural traditions with her practice of the Islamic faith, she responded by saying, "Honey, I use whatever works."

I was struck in these studies by how flexible black women are in their religious practices despite their stated commitments to a particular religious tradition. These women sometimes adopt and adapt diverse spiritual practices in their personal devotions as well as in their work with women and girls affected by violence and economic, racial, and gender oppression. Even though these practices are not necessarily sanctioned by their respective religious institutions, these women readily employ strategies that function to elevate what they understand as vital spiritual energies and embrace and affirm women as embodied selves. These women see themselves as paying "mystical attention"[15] to the spiritual and social currencies they perceive within their inner and exterior lives. While their religious traditions are important to them, when it comes to the healing and liberation of African American women and girls their fundamental concern is whether or not the spiritual practice, technology, or modality is *efficacious*; that is, whether or not it can be used as an effective tool in the project of building and constructing emancipatory lives and spaces in which black women and their communities can thrive and dwell. I see the work of these women and their religious orientations and practices as indicative of this wide tradition of African

American spirituality and its relationship to the ongoing project of black emancipation and liberation.

In this book, I analyze the religious experiences of nineteenth-century African American women as a way of attempting to further excavate and understand the spiritual heritage of these women who similarly exercise a kind of mystical attention in their private and public religious observances and social activism. Moreover, I seek to understand how this excavation and cultivation of black women's inner lives might relate to the larger economy of North American institutions and structures. I employ mysticism as a category for interpretive analysis not only as a way of locating these women's experiences and practices within this broader African diasporic mystic culture, but also as a way of acknowledging their participation in the nineteenth-century religious, cultural, and social milieu that served as the context for modern definitions of mysticism. While black women understood their inner spiritual lives as rooted in authentic spirituality, their spirituality was often associated, pejoratively, with the "extravagant" "enthusiasms"[16] of what was deemed religious excess. Therefore, I utilize mysticism as a category to not only include black women within the tradition of African American mystic culture and the nineteenth-century milieu that produced modern and "positive" notions of mysticism in North America, but also to acknowledge, in order to interrogate, the history of "negative" interpretations often associated with the spiritual practices of women and marginalized ethnic and racial groups by scholars and religious authorities.

In chapter 2, I will discuss the etymology of the term "mystical." For now, I would like to briefly discuss the modern use of the term "mysticism." Leigh Eric Schmidt lays out the genealogy of the term in his essay "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism.'" He reports that "mysticism" first appears in the English language in the mid-1700s. The term was then used as an English Enlightenment critique of religious enthusiasm. This enthusiasm was often associated with denominations such as the Quakers and the Methodists. Mysticism was considered by some to be the religious excesses of sectarian and fanatical ecstasies. Predominantly associated with women these "undignified" demonstrations were also sexualized as "amorous extravagancies" and categorized as examples of false religion.[17] Henry Coventry in his book

Philemon to Hydaspe: Or, the History of False Religion in the Earlier Pagan World, Related in a Series of Conversations argued that mysticism as a predominantly "female religion" was fundamentally rooted in the "unruly passion of love" and a "spirituality of sublimated sexuality."[18] One respondent in Coventry's *Conversations* essentially advised women to desist any attempts to meet God and instead, to lie with men for "[w]hat devout women really suffered from . . . was 'the want of timely application from our sex.'"[19] Schmidt argues that mysticism was often considered as "one more excremental waste in the making of an enlightened, reasonable religion" for Enlightenment enthusiasts. He goes on to explain how the term had come to refer to "a more widely recognizable form of false religion" and that expressions of mysticism so defined were "marked by a specific Anglican politics of ecclesiastical containment" that was "aimed especially at high-flying devotionalists and inspired women."[20] Thus, early on the term "mysticism" was used to refer negatively to women's public demonstrations of ecstatic religion as being outside the institutional norms of Christianity.

During the eighteenth century, "mysticism" discourse was separate from notions of institutionally sanctioned mystical theology that had evolved out of the Catholic tradition. By the late 1700s, even within Catholic circles, however, mystics themselves were considered part of a smaller sect or group of pious practitioners. These practitioners were, according Schmidt, too involved in "solitary practices" to be considered a threat to institutional structures.[21] While the scathing critique against mystics and mysticism as indicative of "extravagant" religious behavior had largely abated, mysticism continued to be used as a negative identifier for "enthusiasts and pietists."[22] Schmidt states that it is not until the nineteenth century that mysticism in America became associated with "true" spirituality and inward purity. In fact in 1828, Schmidt reports, the New American Webster's dictionary describes mystics as a "religious sect who profess to have direct intercourse with the Spirit of God" and mysticism as "the doctrine of mystics who profess pure sublime perfect devotion wholly disinterested."[23]

In the 1840s (a time that coincides with Era of Manifestation and movements such as the Millerite movement), Schmidt observes that there is a fundamental shift when the terms

mystic and mysticism become dislodged from their Catholic and enlightenment roots and no longer primarily represent critiques of religious enthusiasm. In the early- to mid-nineteenth-century, mysticism is used more and more to refer to a loosely spiritual, emancipatory, universal, heterogeneous religious path. Thus, according to Schmidt, "mysticism" as a classification came to identify "a global species of religious experience" that included "subspecies" of diverse "historical, geographic, and national" locations.[24] This sets the stage for late-nineteenth and twentieth-century theologians and theorists of mysticism such as William James and Evelyn Underhill to outline fuller descriptions of mysticism as a category of religious experience. Schmidt argues that it is important to uncover the genealogy of mysticism as a modern interpretive category because modern notions of mysticism have given rise to twentieth- and twenty-first century popular discourse on spirituality. In fact, Schmidt argues, "Mysticism is…the great foundation upon which this revived love of spirituality has been built."[25]

Notions of spirituality in the era of "New Age" and diverse spiritual alternatives have been considered light fare in the academic study of religion and have often been dismissed as referring to exercises in self-absorption by many in the hierarchies of organized religion. In some ways these criticisms may be warranted in that, as Beldon C. Lane suggests, ahistorical and decontextualized "spiritualities are unquestionably involved in masking various forms of hegemony and ideology."[26] In this way, the quest for universal transcendence may obscure the structural realities at work within the larger social context. In the academic study of spirituality, however, scholars such as Lane, Diana L. Hayes, and Peter J. Paris have attempted to define spirituality in ways that endeavor to avoid these pitfalls.

For Lane, the academic study of spirituality is

> the study of a community's mode of engagement with life, the way it makes transition from "knowing" to "living" in its appropriation of the truth it practices. This necessarily includes the symbols that the community uses to embody its deepest convictions, as well as the ritual performances which subsequently express reality in mimetic action.[27]

In her description of African American spirituality, Diana Hayes places emphasis on the relationship of African American people with a God who is active within human history. African American spirituality is "contemplative, holistic, joyful, and communitarian." It emphasizes justice and liberation and calls individuals and persons within community to live out ethical commitments based on a divine vision of justice.[28] Hayes's definition of African American spirituality is rooted in African American praxis. Peter Paris defines spirituality as "the animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for individual and collective experiences." He uses the symbol of the soul—"the integrating center of their power and meaning"—as a metaphor for individual and collective spirituality.[29] Similar to Hayes, Paris sees the spirituality or soul of African people or people in the African diaspora as grounded in movement—in other words it is dynamic, embodied, *lived*. This spirituality is grounded in the struggle for survival and liberation and the marshaling of life forces "that have the power either to threaten and destroy life…or to preserve and enhance it…."[30]

As a womanist religious scholar, I consistently seek to interpret how persons, particularly African American women, understand and relate to sacred power by analyzing the places of tension within the interstices of gender, race, class, and environment that are related to black women's lives and communities. I see black women's descriptions of mystical engagement as inhabiting these interstices in ways that enable them to confront and resolve these tensions along their spiritual journeys. Black women's spiritual journeys invariably involve a quest. Ultimately, this quest is a quest for home—sacred identity in the face of racial and gendered demonization and dehumanization; autonomous space to create and live freely and fully in whole community and full inclusion within the human community and its institutions; and empowerment and meaning as integrative processes constructed to counter marginalization and fragmentation.

To my knowledge, *African American Female Mysticism: Nineteenth-Century Religious Activism* is the first book-length treatment of nineteenth-century African American female mysticism that offers an exploration of this quest. The primary subjects of the book are three icons of nineteenth-century black female

spirituality and religious activism—Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, and Rebecca Cox Jackson. I focus on these three women's spiritual autobiographies because together their texts represent a diverse collection of mystic qualities and, at the same time, include reports of mystical experiences that not only parallel each other's accounts, but mystical accounts in other narrative forms.[31] In this way, these women help to establish a particular canon of black female spirituality that evidences black female mystical activism in the nineteenth century.[32] All three of these women are usually identified solely within the Protestant Christian tradition. Protestant Christianity, however, is often associated with strict monotheism, private religious experience, and an oppositional relationship between the body and spirit. I contend that by confining such women's religious orientations and spiritual practices to a rigid container of North American Protestant Christianity and what Kelly Brown Douglas refers to as a closed monotheism may preclude us from fully recognizing how these women created and inhabited spaces of complex subjectivity. What may be more helpful is to view nineteenth-century African American female spirituality within the contextual landscape of what Charles Long refers to as "cultures of contact" and religious orientation rooted in historical processes of exchange among the Aboriginal-European-African peoples in North America.[33] These cultures of contact would then constitute a North American religious and cultural habitus as defined in Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice shaped by the respective orientations, dispositions, and ritual strategies of its contributing cultures.

Although nineteenth-century African American women and men adopted Anglo-Protestant religious forms they did so through the dispositional lens of what Diana Hayes and Joan Martin refer to as a common African orientation or ethos that was diversely adapted to North American institutions. This common orientation includes elements such as

1. belief in a Supreme deity along with a plurality of other deities, spiritual beings and the continuing presence of ancestors;
2. gender inclusiveness in conceptions of deity;
3. nondualistic understandings of the spiritual and material realities;
4. vitality and harmony as ethical goals for human potentiality and communal relationships.

Many nineteenth-century black women entertain cosmological worldviews that are also informed by a similar ethos. These women approach their spirituality with, as Chireau suggests, more diverse and flexible conceptions of divinity and gender identifications, a focus on spiritual efficacy as an important goal of religious practice, and more porous boundaries between visible and invisible worlds. In light of this ethos or common orientation, I propose that the nineteenth-century African American female mystical activism of Lee, Truth, and Jackson are informed by what I refer to as "sacred-social" worldviews. By sacred-social I do not intend to imply a dichotomy between, say, the sacred versus the mundane or even between the sacred and the profane; rather I seek to express the connection between the sacred as invisible aspects of African and African American cosmological worldviews and the social, that is, the visible and observable aspects of a cosmological universe.

Operating then out of an African American ethos or sacred-social worldview, nineteenth-century African American women asserted themselves as religious subjects by way of mystical experience and spiritual practices. These experiences and practices included ecstatic phenomena such as visitations, visions, dreams, and contemplative practices such as prayer and meditation. Consequently, these women laid hold to new knowledge claims and authority that empowered them to reject culturally circumscribed roles. They also expanded their visions of the inhabitants of, and operating relationships within, their own sacred-social worlds. Compelled by the missionary impulse of their liberating encounters, they became religious and social activists. Thus, the mystical engagements of nineteenth-century African American women produced concrete action in the world intended to bring about social change and transformation.

Particular Approach

In this book, I employ a multidimensional approach for which the image of the spider's web is an appropriate metaphor. Referring to Jonathan Edwards's use of the spider metaphor in his sermon "An Angry God," Lane utilizes the spider as a metaphor for interpreting symbols and symbol-making as critical processes in the

academic study of spirituality. Lane argues that the spider's act of spinning webs serves as a symbol of the interdisciplinary methods necessary for the investigation of human spirituality.[34] The study of human spirituality includes religious, historical, psychological, embodied, social, and aesthetic dimensions. In this book, I incorporate a web of interdisciplinary approaches. This project presents a comparative, multilayered exploration of the complexities of African American female spiritualities and mystical activism. It is rooted in womanist approaches to the study of religion. Primary sources include nineteenth-century black women's spiritual narratives as well as narratives, ethnographic data, and historical materials. Methodological approaches include sociological, phenomenological, historical, and theological.[35]

To analyze the social dimensions of the women's lives in relationship to their spiritualities, I draw upon the works of Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of practice. Bourdieu developed his theory of practice as a way of explicating the embodied practices of individuals within the social world and understanding the structural mechanisms and power dynamics involved in the makeup of a person or individual. I use his theoretical approach to investigate the sociohistorical conditions that have produced what Charles Long identifies as a "culture of contact"[36] and a religious orientation rooted in processes of exchange among European, African, and Native American people within the North American context. I augment this historical and sociological approach with theoretical approaches to mysticism and spatial theory starting with Carmel Bendon Davis's concept of mystical space. By applying a critical lens to Davis's concept, I construct a theoretical perspective on mystical space as emancipatory space as presented in nineteenth-century black women's spiritual autobiographies and narratives.

Chapters

This book will not only continue to lay the foundation for the inclusion of African American female religious experiences within the scholarly discourse on mysticism but will also provide a comparative and nuanced discussion of nineteenth-century black women's mystical worldviews. Chapter 1, "African American Female Mysticism: The Nineteenth-Century Contextual Landscape," describes the contextual environment

that shaped and impacted these African American women and their religious experiences. Against the backdrop of this description, I provide a brief analysis of the historical and cultural demonization of nineteenth-century African Americans. Here, I raise the question that is fundamental to this project: Given the marginalized existence of African American women, in particular, and the precarious conditions of African American life, in general, how did nineteenth-century black women resist and subvert the hegemonic forces of systemic oppression? In chapter 2, "Defining Mysticism and the Sacred-Social Worlds of African American Women," I explore the influences of incarnational theologies on black women's mysticism. I provide a critical survey of how mysticism has been defined in Christian theological and religious scholarship and how the privileging of a definition of mysticism rooted in platonic dualisms have marginalized religions that do not practice a "closed monotheism" or emphasize embodied practices. Therefore, African American women's embodied knowledge and action have not been widely considered as legitimate expressions within the larger tradition of Western mysticism. In this chapter, I survey traditional and contemporary definitions of mysticism to provide a critical view of this history of Western mysticism and its definitions and present my own definition in light of nineteenth-century black women's experiences.

In chapter 3, "Standing upon the Precipice: Community, Evil, and Black Female Subjectivity," I contend that Jarena Lee's use of the image of the spider's web in her conversion story serves as a metaphor for the sacred-social world of African American mysticism and points to the strategies nineteenth-century black women may have used to confront evil and oppression. I also explore the ways in which the spider's web signals liminality, negotiation, and integration in black women's mystical spiritualities. In chapter 4, "God I Didn't Know You Were So Big: Apophatic Mysticism and Expanding Worldviews," I analyze Sojourner Truth's journey of resistance, and mystical transformation using Beverly Lanzetta's concept of *via feminina* or the "unsaying" of oppressive images and ideas. I also conduct a comparative analysis of the festival of Pinkster or Whitsuntide with the role and function of carnivals and festivals in continental, Caribbean, and North American mystical experience. Finally, I discuss how Truth's mystical practices

point toward a notion of sacred ecology as an aspect of African American mysticism and female identity making.

In chapter 5, "Look at What You Have Done: Spiritual Power and Reimagining the Divine," I analyze Rebecca Cox Jackson's relationship to sacred power in her mystical experiences and mystical activism. I explore parallels of this relationship with concepts and practices within the Yoruba tradition. Toward this end, I look at the Yoruba notion of ashe or the "power to make things happen," and discuss literary theorist Katherine Clay Bassard's contention that Jackson's relationship to thunder and lightning may be parallel to a devotee's relationship to the Yoruba Orisha Shango. In this chapter, I expand this parallel to include one of Shango's female counterparts Oya. This comparison is significant in that Jackson's religious innovations regarding gender and divine imagery include her visions of, and writings about, a divine Mother that extend beyond an exclusively male notion of deity.

In chapter 6, "Weaving the Spider's Web: African American Female Mystical Activism," I investigate West African and African American (North American and Caribbean) notions of Anansi the spider that serve as rich metaphors regarding the intricate interconnections of the sacred-social worlds of African American women. In particular, the characteristics and cultural interpretations of Aunt Nancy the spider woman, the North American version of Anansi, help to reveal the mystical qualities and cultural significances of African American female subjectivity. I present an analysis of how the Aunt Nancy and Anansi tales of the United States (woman-hybrid), West African (trickster), and the Caribbean (cultural hero) provide parallel examples of the significance of liminality and reintegration in African Diaspora traditions. Here, I establish the US Aunt Nancy figure as the central metaphor for nineteenth-century black women's mystical activism.

1

African American Female Mysticism: The Nineteenth-Century Contextual Landscape

The religious quest of African American women is fundamentally a search for place and space. These movements involve the work of constructing emancipatory identities in the face of gender and racial stereotypes of blackness and femaleness. For nineteenth-century African American women this meant having to navigate competing notions of feminity and hierarchical notions of race entrenched within the cultural and social institutions that affected their lives, their communities, and the nation. It also meant working to transgress the boundaries of externally and structurally circumscribed roles for black women while struggling to inhabit complex subjectivities within public and private domains. In exploring the Afra-American[1] search for place and space, it is important to note that the contextual landscape of black female social existence in nineteenth-century North America was shaped by "systematic attempts" to "physically, psychologically, culturally, economically, and spiritually" subjugate African American people.[2] Moreover, "[l]egally and or socially sanctioned forms of violence, intimidation and exploitation (including rape, lynching, beating, and economic deprivation) were tools designed" to silence and control African American women, and perpetuate the dehumanizing system of slavery and the suppression of free blacks.[3] Religious, social, scientific, and economic structures and institutions collaborated in many ways to objectify African American women as "Other."[4] Black women were typecast as stereotypical Mammies and Jezebel's in the drama of an American racial

J.R. Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism*

narrative steeped in the patriarchal and white supremacist value systems of plantation life in the South and white paternalism and black servitude in the North.

Longtime free and soon-to-be freed women and men labored to rehabilitate the objectifying images of black women as loyal Mammies or promiscuous Jezebels by promoting notions of black femininity and the black family that, while debunking the aforementioned myths in many ways, remained consistent with white patriarchal norms of gender roles and delineations of public and private power.[5] This meant that free and freed African American women, in their navigations of place and space within nineteenth-century America, still had to contend with strange and strained gender and racial demarcations related to private responsibilities and public roles even within African American social, political, and religious institutions. In spite of these attempts to control, circumscribe, and exploit them, black women exercised the agency to carve out public lives of engagement. As social agents women such as Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells, Julia Foote, and Sojourner Truth exercised radical subjectivities that flouted the circumscribed roles black women were expected to fulfill and countered the stereotypical images of black feminity. These women embodied identities that were multipositional, relational, and complex.[6] In so doing, they were influenced by the religious, political, economic, and social diversity of nineteenth-century North America. Given the social, political, and ecclesial marginalization of African American women, in particular, and the predicament of African American people, in general, how did these women create their own autonomous spaces for activism and agency? How did nineteenth-century black women resist and even transcend the systems of domination that pervaded North American life? For many black women, it was their religious experiences and practices that empowered them to transgress gender, race, and class boundaries and to, therefore, combat social, political, and economic oppression.

In this book, I will explore, more specifically, the ways in which Christian-identified African American women's mystical experiences enabled these women to assert themselves as emancipated Subjects[7] and empowered them to both define themselves for themselves and to live out transformative, active public lives within a patriarchal, white supremacist culture. I contend

that it was black women's mystical encounters and the resultant sacred-social connections drawn from an African American mystic culture and the broader North American habitus that enabled them to engage in embodied countercultural action. These women constructed and participated in "mystical spaces"[8] in which they laid claim to vital personal cohesion despite problems of social and cultural fragmentation. Within these mystical spaces they exercised the authority to act as mediators of sacred power. In this way, nineteenth-century African American women resisted the cultural impositions of one-note stereotypes and gendered role limitations to assert complex subjectivities and embodied practices that defied cultural circumscriptions.

Below, I describe and analyze the contextual environment that shaped and impacted these African American women and their religious experiences and practices. In so doing, I draw upon Carmel Bendon Davis's work in spatial theory and mysticism and the works of Pierre Bourdieu and his theory of practice. In his essay, "Simulating Pure Land Space: The Hyperreality of Japanese Buddhist Space," William E. Deal cites biblical scholar Jim Flanagan's work, "The Trialectics of Biblical Study," as establishing the importance of using spatial theory in the academic study of religion to "bridge the gap" between historical approaches and social contexts. Flanagan, drawing from the works and spatial theories of Edward Soja, develops a "trialectic" that includes discourses of historicality, sociality, and spaciality as a way to understand the multiple dimensions of the human context. Spatial theory is critical in that for human beings "[s]pace is a fundamental sub text in all social understandings. And space is constructed through *praxis* and therefore based on experience."[9] Sterling Stuckey and Rachel Harding both discuss the significance of space in the mystic and religious cultures of the African diaspora. In *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, Stuckey points to the importance of sites that, for example, connect African Americans to sacred power, and serve as mediating ground for sacred-social relationships.[10] In her book, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* Harding stresses the importance of how black people used "physical, sociopolitical, cultural, psychic, and ritual-religious locations"[11] in order to create and recreate relationships and countercultural identities

"within the matrix of slavery."[12] Here, I use spatial theory as a way of grounding women's textual, historical, and social lives in mystical praxis. In addition, I utilize the concept of mystical space to identify and analyze the ways in which nineteenth-century black women's mystical encounters created alternative sites for mediating spiritual and social power. I will explore this notion of mystical space further in chapter 2. Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice will assist me in further analyzing the ways in which power operates within social and religious contexts.

Bourdieu developed his theory of practice as a way of understanding how social structures influence what we understand as the individual, and how these social influences are expressed in individual and group practice. Bourdieu contends that persons are molded by structural mechanisms and power dynamics within society.[13] He identifies his approach as "generative structuralism" that provides the basis for how dominating structures and class divisions are reproduced within a given society. Bourdieu's generative structuralism is based on the assumption of a "homologous" culture. Within the context of the modern construction of "America," I am investigating sociohistorical conditions that have produced what Charles Long identifies as a "culture of contact"[14] and a religious orientation rooted in processes of exchange among European, African, and Native American people. Therefore, I am utilizing Bourdieu's theory in order to not only explicate how the structures of social domination operating in nineteenth-century North America and their reproduction impacted African American female life, but also how Bourdieu's theory applied to a nonhomologous social and cultural context reveals the ways in which individual and group identity-constructions can counter these structural reproductions and lead to social transformation. Later, I will discuss limitations of Bourdieu's theory and introduce correctives that will better enable us to apply his theory in an analysis of nineteenth-century black women's sacred-social worlds. I begin now with a discussion of the key concepts of Bourdieu's theory.

The key concepts of Bourdieu's theory of practice are field, habitus, and capital. According to Bourdieu, "Society consists of a collectivity of interrelated and 'homologous' spaces, or 'fields.'" These spaces or fields are "networks of relations between

individuals and institutions competitively engaged in the dynamics of capital production, pursuit, consumption, and/or accumulation."[15] These fields are multidimensional. They are always in flux and constantly changing as social agents act in and upon the field.[16] The relationships among actors in the field are reciprocal (though not necessarily mutual), and are based on status and varying levels of power. Diverse social activities make up the various fields. Fields operate according to particular interests, strategies, and legitimating authorities. The various fields include social, political, economic, and religious spaces. Within each field diverse social agents and institutions compete and struggle to accrue capital and the power this capital carries within the field.[17] Dominating structures within the fields serve to legitimize the social order as "natural" and to enable persons to "make sense of their positions in the social order."[18]

At the same time, social fields perpetuate their own social structures through the inculcation of *habitus* that is the character, dispositions, perceptions, thoughts, actions, or more generally a "feel for the game [of the particular social field]" inhabited by social agents.[19] In turn, social agents interact within social fields, that is, engage in social practice through habitus. Practice is bodily practice that takes place in the social world. Individuals and groups develop and practice strategies that are appropriate to meet their material and social needs.[20] Because habitus is developed at an early age bodily practices are pre-reflexive. Habitus is informed by embodied memory on an unconscious level and operates as the embodiment of structure. Bourdieu also understands habitus to be deeply associated with class that for him is "defined as individuals sharing the same dispositions as well as the same external conditions of existence."[21] Social agents reproduce structures of the social field by way of bodily practices. Within the social fields, agents occupy spaces of status based upon capital. Capital involves the resources that accrue to groups or individuals involved in a network of relationships that are mutually recognized within particular fields.[22] Forms of capital include social, cultural, religious, and economic. Religious capital, for example, provides individuals and groups with status and power within the religious field. According to Terry Rey the practices of social agents are "the sum produce of a persons' active

engagement of capital in any given field."[23] Bourdieu understands religious capital to be produced and amassed within the hierarchies of religious institutions.[24] The religious field operates in the same manner as other fields. Within the religious field social agents and institutions struggle to accrue religious capital and the power this capital conveys within the field.

For Bourdieu, religion especially serves to "consecrate" and legitimize the social order as "natural" and normative. In other words, religion serves to define and defend the places of social agents within the hierarchical institutions of the religious field. Bourdieu developed the notion of symbolic violence to explain how agents within a society come to view the social order and their respective places within it as "natural." Symbolic violence is characterized by masking and denial and is socially recognized by its "misrecognition." Symbolic forms of violence are "euphemized"—hidden and presented as unquestioned norms within the culture and society. Therefore, symbolic violence serves as the primary mechanism that perpetuates structures of domination.[25] Bourdieu also recognizes that actual forms of violence are used as well to establish and maintain domination. He identifies elementary forms of domination with "overt physical or economic violence."[26] However, Bourdieu also argues that overt forms of violence within established structures of domination coexist with symbolic forms.

> Once a system of mechanisms has been constituted capable of objectively ensuring the reproduction of the established order by its own motion . . . the dominant class have only to *let the system they dominate take its own course* in order to exercise their domination; but until such a system exists, they have to work directly, daily, personally, to produce and reproduce conditions of domination which are even then never entirely trustworthy. Because they cannot be satisfied with appropriating the profits of a social machine which has not yet developed the power of self-perpetuation, they are obliged to resort to *the elementary forms of domination*, in other words, the direct domination of one person by another, the limiting case of which is appropriation of persons, i.e. slavery.[27]

The political, social, and religious structures that dominated nineteenth-century North America reproduced systems of Western

hegemony through forms of overt and symbolic violence. This violence helped to maintain and perpetuate racial, gender, and class distinctions in general and the systems of slavery, patriarchy, and Anglo-Christian hegemony in particular. Through these systems of domination, the bodies of African and American indigenous people have been exploited, violated, and demonized in a world culture shaped by a legacy of colonialism and imperialism. Racism, sexism, sexuality, religion, and culture are profoundly intertwined in the history of colonialism. To use womanist theologian Delores Williams's definition, "colonization means that the dominating, intruding culture attempts either to wipe out or to assimilate the native culture into the dominating culture so that control and often exploitation of the natives' resources can take place."[28] In order for colonialism and imperialism to thrive, colonial powers had to develop and implement strategies by which they could conquer, control, and/or exploit the land, cultures, bodies, and spiritualities of the indigenous people in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Toward these ends, European colonizers employed symbolic and physical forms of violence to render those colonized complicit in the very systems that would dominate their lives. In this way, the colonizers engaged in coercion of the desires, capacities, skills, and gifts of the colonized who rather than fully applying their gifts and passions to reproduce structures and amass capital for their own individual or group vitality were now employed to accumulate capital and markers of status for the colonizers.

Western Christian institutions have also been complicit in the symbolic violence of devaluing and even demonizing the centuries-old belief systems of indigenous African and Amerindians. The work of Kelly Brown Douglas suggests that these forms of symbolic violence are rooted in Christianities informed by dualistic platonic interpretations of Western philosophy and theology. According to Douglas, the platonic tradition provides what she calls the "definitive dualistic paradigm" that underlies the Western Christian orientation. She goes on to say that

> platonized Christianity . . . fosters dualistic ways of perceiving the world as well as relating to the non-Christian world. It utilizes a dichotomous sexualized ethic to discern the acceptability/holiness of various people.[29]

This dichotomous sexualized ethic became a tool of symbolic violence that led to the dehumanization of non-Christian and non-Western people. Christian colonial missionaries, for example, often labeled darker-skinned people as "heathen" because of their religious, sexual, familial, and other cultural practices. The demonization of these religious/cultural practices helped to justify the subjugation of darker-skinned people and, thus, European colonial domination. Lighter skin, then, served as capital with which light-skinned actors could gain status within society. Darker skin became a liability and source material for acts of symbolic or physical violence. Colonizers acting as social agents committed ongoing acts of symbolic violence that served to reproduce structures of domination in what was to them the "New World." For example, Christian Anglos who colonized "the new world" appropriated biblical texts to justify the decimation of indigenous lands and communities as well as the enslavement of African peoples. North America became the new "the promised land." And Anglo-Christians were the new "chosen people." In this narrative God equipped white Christians to "defeat the Canaanites," that is, Native Americans and enslave black Africans and their gods. In so doing, Anglo-Christians would use the land both in North America and on the continent of Africa in a "productive manner" and bring salvation to the "heathens."[30]

In this way, Christianity helped to justify and even sanctify the colonization of cultures, lands, and even the bodies of darker-skinned people in both hemispheres.[31] The African concept of the body as sacred site for worship and divine communion was foreign to Anglo-Christian authorities. They viewed the highly valued place of the body in African ritual, worship, and communal social life as immoral. As a result, Christian colonizers and slavers maligned and moved to suppress the very rituals and practices that supported harmony and balance within African cultures and institutions. In Bourdieu's words, they had "to work directly, daily, personally, to produce and reproduce conditions of domination" through forms of physical and symbolic violence. Actors and institutions in economic, religious, and political fields worked together in ways that helped to support and perpetuate a larger, "meta-field" of Western hegemony. Even so, the habitus of colonized groups and individuals were not altogether destroyed by

these forms of violence. Even in circumstances of extreme power differentials among social actors within cultures of contact, the relationships among the various actors remain dynamic and reciprocal (although not mutual).

While Bourdieu's theory of practice helps us to better understand the ways in which dominating structures reproduce themselves within homologous cultures, his theory does not extend far enough to address the dynamic relationships among groups and individuals in contact cultures. In order to better understand what Brad Verter refers to as the "lattice of power relations"[32] that exist in a more diverse society and its social, economic, and religious fields, I turn to the work of sociologist Patricia Hill Collins. Collins identifies the oppressive systems that come most acutely to bear on the lives of African American women as working together to form a matrix of domination.[33] This matrix is based on either/or dichotomous thinking in which ideas and persons are categorized along lines of difference.[34] This difference is understood in oppositional terms. The various categories established within the system are essentially separate and distinct and are only related to one another in terms of their definitions as opposites.[35] Thus, one category only has meaning in relationship to its opposite. Due to this oppositional stance, equality in relationships rarely exists within these systems. Tension or conflict within an oppositional framework is resolved by subordinating one half of the dichotomy to the other.[36]

The salient categories established by dichotomous thinking and dominant ideologies include male/female (gender), white/black (race), elite/poor (economic and social class), and Christian/heathen (religious affiliation). Within systems of domination, those who gain the power to objectify and subordinate other groups maintain the right to act as Subjects, to establish their identities, to name and define history, and to determine the nature of reality for subordinate groups. Those who are objectified and subordinated within this system are defined and have their identities created by others and their histories included only as they relate to the history of the dominant group.[37]

In order for us to understand the effects of dichotomous ideologies and the impact that such categories as race, gender, and class have upon black women, Collins recognizes that one

cannot analyze these as separate oppressive systems. Rather, our analysis should assume that these systems are related within a single "overarching structure of domination" overlaid by a matrix that turns on the axes of gender, race, and class and involves multidimensional and multilayered forms of oppression. In providing this conceptual view of the interlocking relationship between dynamics of oppression, the matrix of domination also reveals the complex interconnections between the privileges and penalties accrued by social actors within the matrix to gain compliance as well as the various mechanisms employed to perpetuate dominant/subordinate relationships within this system. Collins is clear in ascribing agency to all actors within the matrix, arguing:

> Domination operates by seducing, pressuring, or forcing…this matrix contains few pure victims or oppressors, individuals derive varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives.[38]

Thus, Collins as does Bourdieu recognizes that the coercive tools used to support dominating structures and institutions such as punishment, reward, and status make even victims of the system complicit in the structures of domination. At the same time, Collins argues that African American women, while oppressed through the vicious institution of slavery and the multiple dimensions of race, gender, and class maintain the agency to engage in activism and resistance to domination and oppression. Collins argues that while the matrix of domination engenders oppression it also creates movements of active resistance to this oppression by members of subordinated groups. Thus, as she contends, "black women's activism presents the matrix of domination as responsive to human agency."[39]

Scholars such as Joan Martin, who utilizes Bourdieu's theory of practice to analyze the working lives of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century enslaved black women, recognize the effectiveness of Bourdieu's theory to explain the dominating structures that affect black women's lives; however, Martin also argues that Bourdieu's determinism does not allow for the conscious ways in which black women intentionally act as social agents within the various fields to subvert or resist these very same structures. She

employs James A. Scott's examination of "hidden transcripts" as a corrective to Bourdieu's theory.[40] While she recognizes that the institutions of slavery and Anglo-Christianity are "value-laden structures" informed by an ethos and worldview that influence enslaved black women's habitus, Martin also asserts that African-derived "common orientations" and adaptations of Christianity influence black women's and African American communal attitudes and behaviors. She contends that African American women, as well as the dominating and subversive structures that affect their lives,

> are the bearers of values and that, in fact, the relation between persons and structures is a highly charged, reciprocal, and dynamic process of creating, maintaining, and transforming the world.[41]

Terry Rey argues, however, that while limited in scope Bourdieu's argument does support Martin's approach to take into account African American women's improvisations, interests, and strategies, in other words, the hidden transcripts of "subaltern" agencies enacted in response to objective conditions.[42] Even though in Bourdieu's theory the inculcation of habitus by dominating structures is intended to reproduce these very structures, individuals acting as social agents are able to respond to the "demands" of "objective potentialities . . . as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus" within particular fields at certain "conjunctures." Conjunctures refer to the relationship between the habitus and the "objective *structure* defining the social conditions [that produce the habitus as well as the circumstances in which an agent's habitus functions] of the production of the habitus which engendered them to the conditions in which the habitus is operating."[43] Bourdieu states:

> The conjuncture capable of transforming practices is constituted in the dialectical relationship, between, on the one hand, a habitus . . . and on the other hand, an *objective event* which exerts its action of conditional stimulation calling for or demanding a determinate response, only on those who are disposed to constitute it as such because they are endowed with a determinate type of disposition.[44]

Thus, while Bourdieu agrees that social actors can affect transformation and change he, nevertheless, argues that it is a determinate response to which the social agent is already predisposed. Individual responsiveness is limited to the particular strategies and dispositions that arise out of the agent's habitus.[45] Although I also reject Bourdieu's determinism as too limiting for fully examining nineteenth-century black women's agency, I would argue that Bourdieu's concept of the dialectical relationship between habitus and objective events or conditions that affect black women's lives might prove helpful. Stewart points to the critical role that the dialectical relationship between personal and social existence (which involves "wrestling with oppression and liberation") play in revealing "processes of religious formation" among black people.[46] Understanding some of the dialectical exchanges that help to shape these formational processes can also help us to better comprehend the religious and social identities of the women included in this study. Again, the fundamental problem is that in his theory Bourdieu does not fully take into account the level of diversity and difference that exists in cultures of contact that inform African American female identity and praxis. Verter expands and further clarifies Bourdieu's notion of habitus in a way that highlights and can better help us to understand this diversity. Verter argues that an individual's habitus is constantly shifting and consists of "the aggregated product of multiple inputs." In this way, a person can intentionally construct "an identity apart from his or her statistical class"[47] by selecting strategies from diverse sources and predispositions operating within a society or meta-culture.

This would account for the ways in which African American women select and improvise strategies and embodied practices in response to the objective events and conditions of symbolic and direct racial, gender, and class violence. In this model, Bourdieu's conjunctures would then be akin to the axes of the matrix of domination. At these conjunctures or axes the dialectical relationship between African American women's habitus and the objective conditions of multidimensional and multilayered forms of oppression ignite black women's motivation to actively respond in ways that transform religious, social, and cultural fields. In this book, I am specifically interested in the ways in which African American women draw from the diverse streams of the

North American habitus to confront dominating structures and to construct and employ strategies that affect changes within the religious and interrelated fields.

Just to restate: In Bourdieu's theory of practice social agents impact relationships within the various fields according to their positions of status. How did nineteenth-century African American women accrue enough capital within these systems to produce change, especially when they were excluded from roles and denied status within the religious field? Verter argues that greater "diffusions" of social power exist in and across fields that aren't necessarily accrued through formal institutional channels of power. Thus, he introduces the concept of "spiritual capital" in addition to religious capital as a way to account for, not only competition among institutions within a field, but also for the more "democratic" exercises of capital operating in diverse social contexts. Because Bourdieu's theory limits struggle within the religious and other fields to struggles *among* institutions and does not address the presence of struggle among classes *within* institutions, his analyses mainly focus on how institutional structures of authority affect the networks of relations and the production and accumulation of capital within a field.[48] Verter, however, develops and incorporates his notion of spiritual capital to account for the agencies exercised and the diversity of dispositions held by laypersons within religious institutions and the religious field. Spiritual capital goes beyond the religious capital employed by institutionally sanctioned specialists. It functions as a more widely dispersed 'commodity,' governed by more complex patterns of production, distribution, exchange, and consumption."[49] By integrating the concept of spiritual capital into Bourdieu's theory of practice one can better examine the ways in which laypersons produce, accumulate, and use capital.[50] Spiritual capital

> [i]n the embodied state . . . is a measure of not only position, but also disposition; it is the knowledge, abilities, tastes, and credentials an individual has amassed in the field of religion, and is the outcome of explicit education or unconscious processes of socialization.
>
> In the objectified state, spiritual capital takes the form of material and symbolic commodities-votive objects, exegetical

> texts, and ritual vestments, as well as theologies, ideologies, and theodicies.[51]

Through the lens of spiritual capital the embodied practices of African American women can reveal black women's dispositions, knowledge, and tastes as well as indicate the modes of "explicit education" and "unconscious processes of socialization" that inform black women's complex identities. These embodied practices also can help us to understand how nineteenth-century African American women may have affected change in their social world. Spiritual capital can be utilized in ways that produce changes in fields other than the religious. Religious capital, for instance, does not primarily operate within a "closed system" that is "produced, accumulated," and "recognized (or misrecognized) only within a narrow circumscribed field of religion."[52] Rather, the religious field itself is interrelated within a "broader cultural nexus."[53] Therefore, religious capital, along with other forms such as spiritual capital, may be recognized in other related fields. Social actors then can amass extra-institutional forms of capital that can then be used to gain positions of status and affect other actors within institutions and within and across related social fields.

The habitus of nineteenth-century African American females was shaped by permeating worldviews operating within North America and the structuring of the overlapping religious, political, and economic fields. While varying degrees of cultural and religious pluralism existed early on in the history of North American colonialism, religious and social capital, valued according to a narrow Platonized and Protestant Christian worldview, most often accrued to white, elite males. In nineteenth-century North America, however, the religious field dominated by Platonized Christianity did not operate in a vacuum. Diverse political, social, economic, and religious factors converged to impact various fields. This convergence of cultures within the "lattice of power" entrenched in the matrix of domination, or in other words, the meta-field of Western Christian hegemony, consisted of a confluence of traditions and dispositions—Native American, Anglo, and African—that informed a larger "American" habitus (what Charles Long refers to as Aboriginal-Euro-African temporal geographic area known as "America" as a space of inquiry).[54]

Within this confluence of streams, diverse ideas and tastes operated regarding interrelated notions of divinity and humanity, freedom and participation, individuality and collectivity, and religious reflection and practice. Below, I briefly discuss the various movements and historical events that have added to this confluence and helped to shape the North American habitus. Later, I examine the ways in which black women have drawn from these streams to fashion social, cultural, and religious responses to systemic oppression.

Nineteenth-Century Contextual Landscape, Religious Field, and Social Capital

During the nineteenth century, religious as well as political and social currents persisted that enabled African American women to tap into traditions that provided them with countercultural ways of being. The Second Great Awakening of the late eighteenth century reignited the wave of democratic enthusiasm and evangelical fervor that continued throughout the nineteenth century. Kelly Brown Douglas argues that the evangelical Protestant movements of the Great Awakenings appealed to African Americans because it was rooted in an "empirical spirituality" in which the body could serve as a site of "divine witness."[55] In addition, these movements fomented an atmosphere of equality. Thus, by way of the Great Awakenings Christianity included a concrete, historical, and theological value and emphasis on freedom and social equality that went beyond notions of spiritual equality espoused by earlier Anglican missionaries.[56]

While the missionary commitments of Anglicized Christians (both black and white) openly worked to convert and root out "heathen" and "pagan" practices of North American native and African peoples and their descendants on US-American soil and beyond, they also gave way to social and political activism by way of "humanitarian reform" movements that helped to provide the moral impetus for Christian involvement in abolitionist activities, the call for women's rights, and increased literacy. Also during this century the holiness movement, which began in the Methodist tradition and was embraced by subpopulations of other Christian denominations, emphasized a radical piety born out of

a demonstrative process of conversion, regeneration, and sanctification. The response to the inward move of the Holy Spirit was central to holiness conviction. This inward conviction compelled the sanctified saints to pursue outward, active lives of radical religious, social, and political activism and to strive for inward moral perfection.

In this way, the cultural milieu of the nineteenth century gave rise to activist discourses and social movements that challenged the gendered, racial, and class narratives that perpetuated oppressive systems. The country's first African American Christian denominations and a growing number of independent black churches were founded during the early part of the nineteenth century, thus altering and expanding the North American religious field. These institutions provided more autonomous spaces for black spiritual, physical, economic, social, and political creativity as well as for organizing and protesting against oppressive systems. Abolitionist publications began to appear around 1820. In 1831 Mary Prince published the first slave narrative authored by a woman of African descent. By the 1840s antislavery conventions were taking place throughout the country. The following year Maria Stewart began her public speaking career addressing racial, gender, and religious themes. Her *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart*—which included speeches, prayers, and essays—was published in 1835. In 1845 *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* was published. With the publication of Margaret Fuller's *Women in the Nineteenth Century* in 1845 came the first comprehensive treatment of American feminism and later that decade the first Women's Rights Convention was hosted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. The issues of gender and race were debated and sometimes caused clashes and splits in both the abolitionist and women's movements. [57]

With concomitant advances in the wake of the Second Great Awakening, religious activism, and the rise of educational opportunities for women during the nineteenth century, black women were taking more active, visible roles in public[58] institutions and movements. The role of women in the public sphere continued to be a subject of much debate. With the rise of a middle class during the industrial revolution of the early to mid-nineteenth century it became "unseemly" for "respectable" women to participate in the

labor force.[59] As men left the confines of family farms and estates to land jobs in industrial centers, women were relegated to their homes. The "cult of true womanhood" came to encapsulate middle-class notions of femininity in which women's spheres of activity and moral influence would be limited to the private sphere. Women were deemed too weak to contend with the evils lurking in public spaces. They were to remain at home in order to maintain their moral purity. From this vantage point of the private sphere it was argued women could then train their children in ways to live moral lives and reign in the lustful, aggressive natures of their men. Nevertheless, women, inspired by the spirit of reform infusing the culture, continued to be active in public roles that extended their powers of moral influence to members of the community through membership in social clubs and religious activism.

Although as dark-skinned women they were viewed as the antithesis of "true womanhood" by the dominant culture, African American women participated in these movements in large numbers and, thereby, created their own social and political spaces of resistance. They were active in the antislavery movement and struggled both openly and discreetly for gender as well as racial justice. Nevertheless for free Black women in the North, Northern abolition did not erase the effects of symbolic violence and repressive ideologies that continued to malign black women as loose and immoral. With the emergence of a new self-conscious middle class in the 1830s, black women and men were also mired in the hierarchical relationship that class and status—as well as color—now had to morality within black institutions.[60] Despite these factors, women in general and increasing numbers of black women in particular became more and more active as leaders in voluntary associations and prayer bands as a result of the evangelical thrust of nineteenth-century revivalist culture. Women also assumed leadership positions in primary and higher education. During the nineteenth century African American women broadened their participation in the culture of public discourse through publications and public speaking. With all of these forms of activism, black women accrued social and religious capital through both institutional and extra-institutional means. In their public writing and speaking African American women were especially able to amass spiritual capital.

African American women's literary traditions and public activism within these larger intellectual, religious, and political movements provided avenues for African American women to construct and inhabit more complex religious and social identities that transcended existing racial and sexual stereotypes. These women published collections, essays, and narratives that utilized rhetorical strategies acceptable to enclaves of public discourse in white progressive circles and provided them with spiritual capital they could then use to promote racial and gender equality in social, religious, and political institutions. Literacy and publications were associated with social and cultural capital across diverse fields within the meta-field of Western Christian hegemony. While all of these forms of literature provide clues regarding the textures of black female life, art, and thought during the 1800s, autobiographical forms were the most revealing as windows into black women's religious worlds and the social and political forces that informed these worlds.[61]

Black autobiography in general serves as important source material for understanding how African Americans have addressed issues of identity and asserted themselves as Subjects, in the "midst of chaos and prevailed."[62] It has also served as a locus for African American critique or truth telling regarding the unjust social, economic, and political conditions that have permeated the lives of black people.[63] In the very writing of black autobiography during the ante- and postbellum periods, African Americans asserted "their right to live and grow"[64] in a culture that sought to break their bodies and destroy their spirits. These texts serve as "literary witnesses" of how individuals transcended the oppressive constraints of society and lived as liberated human beings.[65] Moreover, autobiographical texts not only disclose personal experience, but also reveal the historical, cultural, and familial milieus that shape and inform the African American habitus.

Black women's spiritual autobiographies give specific attention to the role their relationships with divinity play in their abilities to carve out complex subjectivities and a vital sense of personal cohesion. By way of ecstatic experiences and expression of spiritual abilities, black women demonstrated divinely sanctioned power and authority in a culture that often deemed the opaque bodies of African American women as antithetical to or

a perversion of the *imago dei*.[66] Literary critic Joanne Braxton refers to these spiritual autobiographies as "narratives of vision and power."[67] This autobiographical genre is characterized by the presentation of mystical experiences such as ecstatic dreams, visions, and the demonstration of spiritual power and gifts. As we have already seen religious scholars Yvonne Chireau and Dianne Stewart both highlight the centrality of these kinds of "extraordinary" gifts and their associations with sacred power.[68] In these texts, black women tell stories about how they, empowered by the divine, transcended the oppressive conditions of their time and redefined themselves in ways that stood in deep contrast to the definitions others attempted to impose upon them. Even so, these texts at times employ rhetorical strategies and narrative structures that seemingly perpetuate misrecognition of forms of symbolic violence. At the same time, they can also serve as destabilizing and deconstructive corpora containing material that in some ways subverted patriarchal, racist, and paternalistic ideas and practices.

Black Female Spiritual Autobiography, Incarnational Discourses, and Spiritual Capital

In providing testimonies and recording these demonstrations of authority and power, women such as Rebecca Cox Jackson, Jarena Lee, and Sojourner Truth acted as historical agents. Moreover, they interpreted their own experiences and redefined themselves and their relationships within a society that objectified and devalued black and female bodies. By giving voice to the significance of their mystical encounters and activism, these women contributed to a vast repository of resources that reveal the multifarious journeys of black women who have carved out, and asserted a definite sense of self and exercised human agency under oppressive circumstances. Therefore, these autobiographies serve as important sources for theological inquiry, in that they disclose how these women understood and related to sacred power[69] as they confronted and addressed the most fundamental questions of human existence. They also reveal the contours of an Afra-American habitus—that is, black women's social and religious dispositions—as well as the dominating structures

that affect these women's lives. African American women's confessional narratives or literary testimonies helped lay both the intellectual[70] and the theological groundwork for black women's struggles for self-definition and self-determination. In this way, they serve as "public utterance[s]" of private communication with the Holy.[71] In their autobiographical writings black women "commit[ed] voice and body to the telling of the truth"[72] as they experienced and interpreted it. The material existence and embodied testimonies of these texts help to preserve the integrity of their religious journeys. They also better enable us to comprehend the significance of these women's lives, their experiences in the history and memory of an African America, and embodied practices.

By way of these autobiographical texts, we can also better understand how nineteenth-century black women experienced and helped to mediate individual and collective transformation. In their spiritual narratives African American women attributed these kinds of transformations to the inner workings of the Spirit, whose power provides them with the courage and authority to confront and resist evil. Within the divine-human exchange of ecstatic mystical encounter these women believed themselves to be empowered for "communal political engagement"[73] by a God of love and justice who, unlike the culture in which they lived, fully included black women within the divine vision of *communitas*.[74] Through this empowerment and view of God, justice, and community, African American women understood that they were divinely authorized to engage in the prophetic critique of, and religious and social activism that would challenge, the power exerted by dominating structures and institutions and the symbolic forms of violence that they engendered.

Thus, literary scholar, Sue Houchins, refers to these Christian-identified women as "missionary mystics."[75] These women travel across the country and even travel internationally spreading a message of redemption, social inclusivity, and justice. Their mystical activism is grounded in religious experiences that are in some ways similar to the mystical experiences penned by Western Christian mystics. As such, Houchins locates the mystical activism of nineteenth-century black women and their spiritual autobiographies within the shared religious heritage of the Western

Christian habitus and canon. Houchins observes that there are points of identification among the spiritual autobiographies of these women, the autobiographical works of Augustine and European medieval female mystics such as Teresa of Avila, Julian of Norwich, and Margery Kempe. Houchins comments that black women such as Maria Stewart acknowledged the parallels with black women's experience in the nineteenth century and medieval women's struggles. Stewart identified with these women as scholars, nuns, and poets who were "preaching and mixing themselves in controversies."[76] Houchins goes further in pointing out the parallels between these two traditions. She views both as being firmly established in what she refers to as the two fundamental pillars of Christian mysticism—union and incarnation. Grounded in the concepts of union and incarnation Houchins argues that black women's spiritual autobiographies serve as incarnational discourses of divine communion.

> In other words, at the core of both mystical traditions is the belief in the profound union of God with humanity, which is a reflection of that essential, central Christian teaching of the incarnation—the symbolic (and maybe historical) enfleshment of God in the person of Christ....
>
> Therefore, the piety of all of the "sisters of the spirit" (medieval and revivalist) was not only Pentecostal but also "Christocentric, a theology of love that found its supreme expression in the incarnation."[77]

While Houchins identifies the incarnational qualities of African American women's mysticism almost exclusively with the Christian incarnation, other scholars have argued that incarnational theologies and worldviews resonate with religious practitioners across African diaspora cultures and religious ethnicities. This is attributable to the ways in which enfleshment of the divine has been so central to autochthonous Western African and African-derived religions in the diaspora. Within these traditions, however, incarnation of the divine or the enfleshment of the deities is understood as more than merely symbolic or historical. Practitioners of African and African-derived religions understand the deities as demonstrative aspects of a sacred-social communal network. Again, by sacred-social I do not mean to

imply a dichotomy between say the sacred versus the mundane or even between the sacred the profane; rather I seek to express the connection between the sacred as the invisible aspects of African and African American cosmological worldviews and the social as the visible and observable aspects of the cosmological universe. Within this sacred-social network, the human body serves as a discursive site for divine communication. Stewart discusses the centrality of incarnation in African-derived religions in her work on the African elements in Jamaican religious experience. She acknowledges the familiarity of Christian incarnation to people of African descent brought to the Americas based on the centrality of incarnation found in Western African traditions.

> It is significant to note that enslaved Africans . . . were familiar with the phenomenon of incarnation and thus the doctrine of incarnation might have been appealing to some. In African religious cultures, deities frequent human communities by uniting with the human form. Through incarnation, the deities visit with adherents, express revelations, heal, and help to resolve personal and social problems.[78]

Stewart agrees with Houchins regarding the pneumatological ground of African American women's religious encounters with the divine. Stewart goes on to caution, however, against the assumption that black women's dispositions toward the incarnational aspects of Christianity is focused on the incarnational as it relates to Jesus's suffering, death, and resurrection. Drawing upon the works of such womanist scholars as Delores Williams and Kelly Brown Douglas, Stewart contends that black women's incarnational discourses are more likely rooted in Mary's or the female power to give birth to the divine and Jesus's appearance as enfleshed deity. Therefore, black women's incarnational theologies focus upon female creative power and women's capacity to mediate divinity within human community.

This more positive understanding of the body as site for divine communion is foundational in African autochthonous and African-derived religions. In these traditions, the body is viewed as being at the center of the divine—human interaction. Elochukwu Uzukwu states, that "in Africa the body is the crucial focus of [the] realization of harmony in the universe" or spiritual and

social equilibrium.[79] Drawing upon Newell S. Boothe's work in his important book *African Religions*, womanist ethicist Cheryl Kirk-Duggan asserts that an "African ontology" reveals a worldview in which all things are sacred and, thus, "saturated with being." This worldview speaks to a mystical orientation in which the practitioner is engaged in a "God-drenched world."[80] Spiritual and social equilibrium are the fundamental goals of African spirituality.[81] The practitioner's ability to reach and maintain equilibrium is dependent upon her ability to balance and integrate vitality, humanity, wholeness, continuity, and health into her daily life.[82]

In order to maintain spiritual and physical balance, vitality, and harmony, persons and communities need to engage reverently in relationships (which include the natural environment, parents, relatives, and ancestors) and perform appropriate actions (including ritual observances and sacrifices, prayers, initiation rites, abstaining from certain foods, and so on) with respect to both the invisible and visible realms. African ritual worship and incarnational practices such as spirit possession are ways of solidifying this relational network through communication, transformation, and communion. The primacy of maintaining this relational network gives rise to a sacred-social worldview and operating ethos that provides the basis for individual and communal identity construction. The community receives vital knowledge and information from the invisible realm that can assist in maintaining balance and harmony not only within an individual but also on a collective level. Stewart refers to these incarnations as visitations. Through ritual observances and spirit possession the body becomes the sacred ground and medium of divine communication with the human community.[83] I. M. Lewis goes on to suggest that for marginalized persons and communities spirit possession is especially empowering as these visitations work to transform relationships and human consciousness within a global context.[84] Anthropologist Janice Boddy expands Lewis's understanding of the significance of spirit possessions within diverse contexts as not only "challenging global political and economic domination," but also:

> as speaking to quotidian issues of self and identity . . . and articulating an aesthetic of human relationship to the world. Possession is

> about morality, kinship, ethnicity, history and social memory—the touchstones of social existence. Here morality and resistance are one.[85]

Thus, these visitations by way of African American bodies enable marginalized blacks to subvert the status quo. During these incarnational exercises temporal norms are suspended and persons are confronted by the many contours of complex subjectivity. Individuals and communities must then integrate the result of these exercises and newly charged identities into the lives of individuals and embodied relationships within the community. Spirit possession serves as an incarnational event in which divine transcendence and immanence occupy the same space and allow this integration to take place. Albert Raboteau contends that African American Christian-identified experiences of the Holy Spirit are parallel to African autochthonous and African-derived religions in the Americas. These African-derived worldviews were maintained and reconstituted within the ritual structures of the ring shout. These ritual structures were further transformed and reconfigured within the embodied devotional structures of black church practices and performance.[86] Thus, the African-derived worldview and African-derived practices inform the habitus of African American female spirituality and mysticism. Womanist scholar Monica Coleman argues that we should interpret black women's dreams, visions, and "charismatic embodiments of the Holy Spirit" through the lens of the Yoruba understanding of the ongoing role of ancestors in the lives of individuals and communities. She contends that it is by way of the spiritual possession by these ancestral entities that black women are equipped and empowered to transform their environments.[87]

Houchins, however, makes a distinction between "possession" that she views as the divine "speaking to hearing" as opposed to "union" in which "the divine act is hearing to speech." In the second case, Houchins describes union as a discursive engagement in which the divine responds to the human soul, where silence is not an "instance of *deus absconditus*, but of God listening," waiting to respond to the request/plea/call of the practitioner. In both processes of "speaking to hearing" and "hearing to speech," Houchins limits her exploration of the mystical in designated mystical texts to the private, contemplative dimensions of individual interiority.

A full exploration of the function and effects of mystical experience and transformation in the lives of nineteenth-century African American women must also include the ways in which perceptions of the divine "hearing into speaking" *and* "speaking into hearing" serve to transform individuals and communities. This would involve an inclusion of ecstatic mystical experiences that not only relate to the interior, but are also evident in the social dimensions of black women's lives.

In the examination of African American female quest for space and place and the investigation of black women's mystical activism it will be important to explore the interaction between subjectivity and institutional or social fields (as well as religious and familial) and the role enfleshment plays in these interactions. Moreover, it will be important to explore the ways in which black women's bodies serve in mystical encounter as mediating ground for divine-human discourse that can transform both interior/subjective space and institutional/objective space. That black women's bodies mediate divine-human discourse is in and of itself a critical assertion within a sociohistorical context that demonizes, objectifies, and dehumanizes the black female body. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the role of the body in black women's perceptions of, and relationships to, sacred power. This acknowledgment is crucial to understanding African American women's mystical activism. As M. Shawn Copeland explains:

> The body provokes theology. The body contests its hypotheses, resists its conclusions, escapes its textual margins. The body incarnates and points beyond…and mediates our engagement with others, with the world, with the Other.…the body is no mere object—*already-out-there-now*—with which we are confronted: always the body is with us, inseparable from us, *is* us. But always, there is a "more" to you, a "more" to me: the body mediates that "more" and makes visible what cannot be seen.[88]

Thus, in African American female mystical encounters union and incarnation merge. Incarnation is not merely symbolic or even historical in the sense that incarnational events are not limited to the life of Jesus in first-century Palestine. Rather the Spirit or spirits show up within contemporary black women's bodies and communities. Within these mystical spaces black women and

their bodies serve as mediators. This notion that black women's bodies could mediate divinity challenges institutional forms of symbolic violence and subverts the power structures of patriarchy and Anglo-Christian hegemony. Consequently it is this mediating function as well as extra-institutional access to the divine that has served as the major points of contention within Western mystical traditions.

2

Defining Mysticism and the Sacred-Social Worlds of African American Women

While Christianity is also fundamentally grounded in an incarnational theology much of Christian theology and scholarship has privileged a definition of mysticism rooted in platonic dualisms and have marginalized religions that do not practice a "closed monotheism." Normative and, therefore, "legitimate" incarnational theology is spatially and temporally confined to Jesus of Nazareth as *the one and only* incarnation. Moreover, historically the dominant strands of Western Christianity have espoused a worldview in which the embodied knowledges of others (namely, female, darker skinned, and nonheterosexual) are viewed as suspect. Western Christian clerics and scholars have often deemed embodied mystical experience such as ecstatic manifestations—dreams, visions, and so on—as inferior to the so-called higher states of consciousness attained through rational notions of contemplative practices. These contemplative experiences are often assumed "unmediated," a priori experiences and, therefore, considered "true" mystical states.[1]

This ahistorical and decontextualized understanding of mystical encounter and an ambivalent view, at best, and antagonistic view, at worst, toward embodied spiritualities has reified hierarchical social and political structures at various points in history. Moreover, African American women's embodied knowledge and action, have not been widely considered as legitimate expressions within the larger tradition of Western mysticism.[2] I would argue that this is due to the specific history of symbolic violence that has targeted African American women, in particular, and

J.R. Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism*

the antagonism Western Christianity has expressed against the body in general. This antagonism and symbolic violence are both entrenched in the either/or dichotomous structures embedded in the matrix of domination and inform activities of direct and symbolic violence meted out against female, poor, and darker-skinned persons. For example, women's ecstatic encounters and their epistemological assertions are more often reduced to problems of psychological imbalance or emotional disturbance.[3] Those who are less economically well-off have also been demonized and considered to be childlike and incapable of self-supervision. Finally, persons of African descent are often considered "superstitious" and accused of worshipping the devil.[4] Therefore, mystical experiences that are often identified with the experiences of women, those considered "heathens" or the economically marginalized, are also viewed as needing to be contained and controlled in order to preserve order in society and its institutions. Against this backdrop, the ecstatic experiences of African American women whose cultural, religious, and social identities often lay at the crossroads or axes of gender, race, and class have not been fully examined within the context of "legitimate" Western mystical experience. Additionally, black women's epistemological claims have often been dismissed as being outside the religious norm.

Throughout the history of Western Christian mysticism there has been much debate regarding what is considered "legitimate" mystical experience or who should be labeled a mystic.[5] Over time, the definition of the terms "mystical" and "mysticism" have remained "constantly shifting social and historical construction(s)."[6] Grace M. Jantzen argues that historically dynamics of power have influence on how mysticism has been defined. She contends that there exists "an overt link between the knowledge gained through the mystical life and the authority which could be claimed on the basis of that special knowledge."[7] Therefore, because claims of mystical knowledge garner public recognition of authority and power or, according to Bourdieu's theory of practice, allow for the accrual of social and religious capital, church authorities have closely regulated both the criteria for "true" mystical experience and whose religious claims are deemed authentic.

> [A] person who was acknowledged to have direct access to God would be in a position to challenge any form of authority, whether

> doctrinal or political, which she saw as incompatible with the divine will. It is obvious too, that if defining mysticism was a way of defining power, whether institutional or individual, then the question of who counts as mystic is of immediate importance.[8]

Jantzen illuminates how crucial who counts as a mystic is when it comes to the reproduction of power within Christian institutions as she documents the shifts in the relationship between religious authority and mystical claims when women became more prominent in mystical culture. While initially the mystical knowledge and experiences of male clerics were afforded ecclesial notice and authority, Jantzen writes that these notions of public authority shifted when more women began reporting and writing about mystical experiences. Women and their claims of mystical knowledge became domesticated and church authorities relegated mystical experience to the private, subjective spheres.[9] I agree with Janzten's basic argument that issues of power are entangled in how mysticism has been defined and whose experiences are fully included within the Western classical mystical tradition. I further contend that, along with gender, issues of race and economic status are also entangled in how definitions of mysticism are socially constructed.

What Janzten's argument reveals is that those who can claim mystical union with the divine can also lay claim to spiritual capital and extra-institutional access to power. Mystical experience, therefore, lends itself to what Verter referred to as a more diffuse accumulation, production, and exchange of religious and spiritual capital by those who do not hold positions of authority within religious institutions. Or for those who do have some status within the institution, but might otherwise be something of an outsider due to differences in gender, ideology, or social status. Elite male clerics, scholars, and administrators have historically served as the primary arbiters of whose and what experiences should be included as a part of the Western mystical tradition. This cultural, religious, and even political hegemony has greatly influenced scholarly and public discourse on the "nature" of, and definitions for, the terms "mystical" and "mysticism." Below, I survey classical and contemporary definitions related to mysticism that have informed Western Christianity and the North American Christian habitus to (1) establish the classical elements of Western

Christian mysticism that have helped to historically define what is considered "true" mysticism (2) examine how these notions of "true" mysticism in Western culture have served to reproduce Western Christian structures and institutions in culture and society (3) show how more modern developments in approaches to mysticism have contributed to a broadening of our understanding of mysticism, and (4) to assess the various elements of classical and modern notions of mysticism in order to develop a description that could be appropriately applied to nineteenth-century black women's mystical experiences.

The philosophical foundation for Western Christian mysticism is rooted in concepts of contemplation and epistemology found in the works of Plato that assume a great divide between the material dimensions of life and divinity and between the concrete existence of the body and "eternal" desires of the soul or spirit. In Plato's thought while the soul belongs to the divine dimension, it is also alienated from the eternal realm because of its attachment to the body. An essential kinship exists between the soul and what Plato referred to as the Absolute principle of the universe. Due to the attachment of the soul to the body, the soul is far from home. The highest realization of the self lies in the soul's return home to the realm of the Absolute. However, when the soul awakens to an understanding that she is not at home, the soul is then able to engage in a process of "unlearning false" notions of reality that alienate it from the Absolute.[10] In this process, the soul must become detached from false reality—that is, the body and bodily senses—in order to know true reality. The body is a burden, an impediment to self-realization, true knowledge, and immortality. By acquiring certain virtues in its quest to return to the divine dimension, the soul is purified from the damaging effects of its association with the body. It is through *theoria* or contemplation that the soul gains true knowledge and recognizes the Absolute principle or what Plato also calls "the Good." *Theoria* or contemplation is an intellectual process that activates the soul's inherent divinity. Knowledge in this instance is not merely knowledge *about* the Absolute or the Good. *Episteme* here indicates a profound identity with, and participation in, the so-called Object of that knowledge. Although the soul belongs to the dimension of the Absolute, the

soul cannot initiate an experience of the highest vision of the Good, rather the supreme vision reveals itself to the soul.[11]

While Plato's thought deeply influenced Western Christian mystical theology, various thinkers and theologians, both Christian and non-Christian, shaped its evolution. For example, the Jewish writer Philo (20 BCE–50 CE) and the Neoplatonist[12] philosopher Plotinus (205–270CE) both contributed to the development and codification of core concepts and methodological foundations that influenced theories of Christian mysticism. Philo did so by being the first to bring together the Platonic notion of the contemplative ideal with biblical monotheism. He located Plato's ideas in the mind of the Hebrew God and, using allegorical exegetical techniques, interpreted historical biblical figures as examples or models of those who have experienced the supreme vision of the divine.[13] In his biblical interpretations, Philo also focused upon the ecstatic dimensions of the stories of these historical figures. Plotinus emphasized the Platonic notion of ascent to the higher dimensions of reality as an inward or internal process. The goal of this process is to experience katharsis, purification, simplicity, and tranquility. Plotinus's ascent of the soul is achieved through solitude. Ecstasy comes upon one as one steps outside of one's self in the act of contemplation. Love serves as the pathway to a mystical encounter that is focused on the internal and the personal.

The terms "mystical" or "mysticism" were not identified with these earlier developments. The word "mystical" itself is of ancient Greek origins, its root meaning is "to close." Initially, the label "mystic" referred to a person who had been initiated into ancient Greek mystery religions. It was understood that these initiates received special esoteric forms of knowledge. They were sworn to secrecy as a means of safeguarding this knowledge considered to be accessible to only a privileged few.[14] Due to its local origins some early church clerics and scholars opposed the use of the label "mystical" to refer to anything Christian because of its perceived "pagan" ties. In spite of its origins in Greek local traditions, however, the early church eventually appropriated the term during the second century as established church "fathers" appropriated Greek concepts and philosophical ideas within a Christian framework. This Christianization is attributed to Christian theologians such as Origen (185–254 CE), who defined as mystical

that which was explicitly centered in the Christian church and whose Subject was the Christian God as revealed through Jesus Christ. Initially, the term was used to refer to allegorical biblical interpretation.[15]As the term became more Christianized it was applied to Christian doctrine and practices as well. Clerics and scholars believed that scripture, doctrine, and liturgy were veiled and that one could only fully comprehend their mysteries through a deep communion with the invisible, sacred, and objective realities to which they pointed.[16] Thus, the label "mystical" was deemed appropriate. Similar to the Greek mystery religions and notions of episteme in Platonic and Neoplatonic thought, only the privileged few could achieve this communion (that is mostly male scholars who had access to texts and the leisure time to study them and male clerics who performed and interpreted the liturgy and doctrines of the church).

Origen was instrumental in the early Christianization of the term "mystical" and in developing mystical biblical interpretations on texts such as the *Song of Songs*. While Origen, a contemporary of Plotinus, was influenced by Platonic thought, he espoused a different notion of the ascent of the soul from contemporary Neoplatonists. He defined a mystical theology that was distinctly Christian.[17] For Origen, the soul's ascent is not merely a solitary process. It is a movement initiated by Christian confession and baptism and is nurtured by and in the Christian church. Origen's allegorical exegesis of the *Song of Songs* also had a significant impact on Christian mysticism. In his treatment of the *Song of Songs*, Origen outlined the "three stages of mystical life," which are purification, illumination, and union. These stages would become the marks of the "Purgative Way" in Christian mystical theologies. Origen set forth a mapping or itinerary of the mystical path for Christian practitioners.[18] In his exegesis, Origin also used the images of the bride and groom from the *Song of Songs* as a pedagogical tool to illustrate the significance of love and charity in mystical life. The metaphors of bride and groom would also become important images employed by mystics to describe mystical union with the divine. Origen also emphasized the superiority of contemplation over and above the active life. While there would continue to be tension regarding the significance of, and the relationship between, these two forms of mystical expression within

the history of the Christian church, contemplation was most often considered the highest form of spiritual practice.

Augustine (354–430 CE) has been considered by many scholars to be the "founding father" of Western mysticism.[19] As such, the Bishop of Hippo made major contributions to its development.[20] First of all, Augustine's use of the autobiography had a significant influence upon Christian mystical and spiritual traditions. Previously, the "Greek fathers" attempted to "shed light on the soul's quest" for God through exegetical methods. Augustine was greatly influenced by Plotinus, as well. Although, Augustine's view on the soul's ascent echoed the church's belief that the human soul had nothing in common with God that it could commune with a Holy Other. Because of this belief, tension often existed between the church hierarchy and mystical theologies that espoused the "corrupted" soul's union with the divine. Augustine argued that the fallen soul, corrupted by individual and original sin, could not lift itself up to God. Rather, the soul's ascension is the result of God working within human beings.

In Augustine's theology, the ultimate goal is the ascent of the soul or finding a home with God. The perfection of the soul is achieved when the soul is separated from the body and goes home to be with God. The body/soul dichotomy is indicative of Western dualistic thinking. The spiritual and the material or the corporeal are viewed as oppositional. The human stain of sin keeps human beings and God separate. God stands outside of creation and transcends the material world. Church "fathers" such as Origen and Augustine and early mystics greatly influenced the monastic lifestyles and institutions that began to spread in the fourth century of the Common Era. Monastic communities became the institutional embodiment of the mystical piety and religious perspectives of men and women considered exceptional in their navigation of the spiritual path. The ideas and teachings of church "fathers" and leaders of monastic movements were preserved, put into practice, and transmitted through these communities. During the reform movements of the late medieval period, women such as Teresa of Avila also established and/or influenced female and male monastic communities. Under the guidance of their spiritual "fathers" and/or "mothers," monastics committed themselves to ascetic lifestyles and devotional practices that included solitude, prayer, meditation,

and contemplation.[21] McGinn argues that as a departure from earlier notions of mysticism and access to mystical knowledge, the monastic movement signaled a change. Direct access to the sacred was now understood to be accessible to all members of the Body of Christ rather than to just a privileged few. However, even though the monastic movements in many ways made the mystical life more accessible to lay men and women, mysticism was still identified with a cloistered existence and the lifestyle of the "spiritual athlete" who had rejected the world and its culture.

Thus, mystical theology and the monastic lifestyle remained grounded in the notion of a profound separation between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the material world, between contemplation and the everyday active life. On the other hand, mystical theologies and certain aspects of monastic movements were sometimes viewed as anti-institutional and leaders of these movements, especially women, were often suspected of being or were branded as heretics.[22] For instance, while Teresa of Avila has been recognized as an important figure in the history of Christian mysticism, as a woman, the validity of her religious experiences has been questioned and some of her writings were condemned by the church hierarchy.[23] Again, Jantzen asserts that a connection exists between power, gender, and the ways in which women's experiences are often misinterpreted or rendered invalid according to "accepted" definitions of mysticism. She contends that the same public authority given mystical experience when men were the predominant "experiencers" shifted when more women entered the mystical life. She sees a direct historical connection between the domestication of women and the relegation of religious or mystical experience to the private, subjective spheres.

In summary, the core or classical elements of Christian mysticism include the quest for a spiritual home outside of the body, the mystical itinerary (e.g., purification, illumination, and union), solitude, cloistered separation, and ascetical practices. The key contributors to the development of Christian mysticism such as Origen and Augustine were influenced by Platonic schools of thought and later expressions of Neoplatonism. This influence informed the development of essential core concepts and definitions in classical Christian Western mysticism. While thinkers

such as Origen and Augustine adapted Hellenistic notions of the contemplative ideal to fit a Christian framework, their mystical theologies also retained the dualisms and dichotomous ideologies characteristic of Greek philosophy that have marginalized African American women's religious experience within Western religious discourse. The core concepts and classical definitions of mysticism were influenced by the Greek pagan traditions, Greek philosophy, the "fathers" of the early church, as well as monastic cultures. Out of these streams arise Western notions of mysticism and mystical experience fundamentally focused upon privatistic experience, detachment from the body and the material world, superiority of contemplation over the active life, unitary consciousness, and ascension of the soul to the divine realm. Within this context, Christian ecclesial institutions throughout history, have established the boundaries of what is deemed valid as mystical experience. Contemplative practices focusing on the faculty of reason and the achievement of union with God in which the self has been annihilated or absorbed have often been identified with "true" mystical encounter.[24]

The connections made between mystical experience, knowledge, and power in Western Christianity meant that both the content and Subjects of mystical claims were of particular institutional and theological concern. Questions regarding legitimate mystical experience that evidenced individual authority and power were often rooted within an assumed Western dichotomy and conflict between the spiritual and the material. For example, notions of "true" mysticism have largely been identified with a contemplative "ideal" associated with direct, unmediated experiences of the Christian God and of a rational or intellectual nature. Union is often described as involving the annihilation of the self as consistent with a denial of the body and the material world. Ecstatic, sensory, imaginative, or emotional dimensions of religious experience are considered, at best, inferior to this contemplative ideal and, at worst, a distortion of legitimate mystical experience. This dichotomous thinking extended to other bodily, material, and seemingly opposing realities that pitted male against female, light against dark, and Christian against pagan, even in settings in which ecstatic expression was valued. Above, we have explored the development of classical mystical thought and theology from early

and medieval Christian Eastern and Western perspectives. Now, let us turn to the development of "mysticism" as a religious classification in Christian Protestantism.

The Protestant Reformation movement immediately added another layer to the historical trajectory of how mysticism and mystical experience were understood by the institutional churches. The English Reformation, in particular, ran up against the groundwork laid by the monastic movement and medieval innovations. Theologians and clerics of the Reformation rejected monasticism as a legitimate expression of Christian commitment including communities that served as centers of female power and authority. Rather, they insisted that the faithful are called, not to withdraw from the world, but to live out their vocations engaged in a "this worldly-asceticism."[25] Protestant scholars and clerics placed a great deal of emphasis upon collective worship. For them, God reveals God's self through the preached word publicly proclaimed.[26] The Protestant contention was that it was only in the public setting of worship that the community could assure and attest to the legitimacy of divine revelation. They argued that it was difficult if not impossible to measure the authenticity of mystical encounters and resulting revelations arising out of individual, private experience. Thus, the veracity of individual or personal mystical revelation was viewed with skepticism and mystical revelation could not be considered authoritative for the community of believers. Nevertheless, Protestant thinkers and clerics recognized that there is indeed a mystical dimension to conversion and other religious experiences. Despite the history of Protestant critique of mysticism,[27] there were high profile Protestant leaders who delved deeply into mystical schools of thought. Martin Luther studied the works of Dionysius the Areopagite. John Wesley studied the works of William of St. Thierry while he was at Oxford. Even Jonathan Edwards's writings took on the language of neoplatonic mystical thought in his *Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World.*

> The emanation…[of] divine fullness, consisting in the knowledge of God…In the creature's knowing…the glory of God is both exhibited and acknowledged; his fullness is received and returned. Here is both an emanation and remanation.[28]

Thus, Protestant scholars and clerics also drew upon neoplatonic thought for its mystical content and incorporated it within their Christian reflections.[29] At the same time, they were suspicious of mystical claims that were based on private experience. They did, however, acknowledge the mystical dimensions of conversion. Later, within the cultural milieu of a nineteenth-century North American and predominantly Protestant habitus, the classical elements of Western Christian mysticism continued to circulate. As Douglas argues, Protestantism was still a form of Platonized Christianity that was based in conceptual dualisms. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, however, religious scholars began to develop different definitions of mysticism as they were exposed to more diverse religious perspectives.

At the same time, it is important to note that the classical elements of the Western Christian tradition continued to influence these modern conceptions. In his study of psychology and religion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, William James set forth the four marks that for him define mystical experience across various religious expressions. His classic text *Varieties of Religious Experience* outlines these four marks as follows: (1) ineffability, (2) a noetic quality, (3) transiency, and (4) passivity. James argued that religious experience is rooted in mystical consciousness.[30] Mystical experience is a direct experience that cannot be expressed in words. In fact, mystical experience defies verbal translation. The one who experiences mystical consciousness is afforded new levels of insight, receiving revelations and special kinds of knowledge. Mystical states are also short-lived; they cannot be sustained over long periods of times. Finally, James contends that while mystical states can be set in motion by certain practices it is a passive experience in which the will of the Subject is suspended and the Subject is "grasped and held by a superior power."[31]

In her article, "The Essentials of Mysticism," theologian Evelyn Underhill describes mysticism in language that is consistent with the purgative way set forth by Origen in the first century. She continued to place emphasis upon contemplation as the path to a "pure, unmediated" union with the Object of Love. Evelyn Underhill defines mysticism as "an overwhelming consciousness of God and [one's] own soul: a consciousness which absorbs or

eclipses all other centers of interest."[32] Underhill sees the pursuit of mystical consciousness not as a rational exploration, but as an art. Finding William James's four marks limited in capturing the essence of mystical experience, she proposes her own four "rules" for evaluating mystical experience.

First of all, she contends that "true mysticism" is both practical and active and is an "organic life-process" in which the whole self is engaged. Second, the goal of the mystic is to experience harmony with transcendent reality. Third, the object of mystical experience is both absolute and personal—the "Reality of all that lives" and a "living and personal Object of Love." This absolute and personal "One" draws the whole self home. Finally, union with this Reality, with this living, and personal Object of Love affects one's life such that she is liberated, her character is transformed, and a new form of consciousness takes up residence within her.[33] Underhill places emphasis upon contemplation as the path to a "pure, unmediated" union with the Object of Love. She rejects the notion that visions and what she calls "other abnormal phenomena" are "true" mystical experiences. She does recognize, however, that a mystic must employ language, image, and/or symbols in order to communicate the nature of these encounters.[34]

Scholars such as William James and Evelyn Underhill hold to what has been identified as an "essentialist" position. In the study of mysticism, an essentialist view is one in which a scholar begins with the assumption that all mystical experience is essentially the same and that either the descriptions "reflect underlying similarities" or that even where language differs across cultural and/or religious traditions the fundamental experience is still the same.[35] Stephen Katz critiques the essentialist viewpoint as he makes a "plea for the recognition of differences" in mystical experiences across cultural contexts.[36] Katz argues that there are no "pure unmediated" experiences and demands a contextual approach. He contends that our "beliefs shape experience" just as our "experience shapes belief."[37] For Katz, mystical experience is conditioned and shaped by what he calls a complex epistemological matrix, a "socio-historic conceptual field" that is informed by memory, choice, language, culture, religious tradition, social expectations, and so on.[38] Katz asserts that paradigmatic mystical figures establish norms, categories, and ideals for mystical experiences

and that their biographies serve a didactic function for others.[39] Katz also critiques the notion that mystical experience leads to a liberation of the self from a state of conditioned or contextually bound consciousness to a state of unconditioned awareness that transcends any particular context. In Katz's analysis, what occurs is rather a *re*conditioning of a person's consciousness of the self. [40] Finally, although Katz understands mystical experience as being contained within a definite structure, he does assert that in mysticism "improvisation" and innovation is possible beyond the tenets of a particular religious faith.

Historian, Jess Hollenbeck modifies Katz's non–a priori, contextual approach. Even though Hollenbeck embraces a contextual approach to mysticism, he does not dismiss the possibility of a priori religious experience altogether. Hollenbeck concedes that the content of the experience is "historically conditioned" by particular structures, images, and language already present in doctrine, rituals, or myths that inform the mystical experience. He also states, however, that as a result of the "empowerment of the imagination" the experience can yield new knowledge and meaning. For Hollenbeck, empowerment is a fundamental aspect of mystical experience and ecstatic experience plays a significant role in the power to reimagine.[41]

Religious scholars such as Howard Thurman, Alton Pollard, and Barbara Holmes assert their own definitions of mysticism within the matrix of memory, culture, history, and experience in the lives of African Americans. All of the aforementioned religionists fundamentally view mysticism and mystical experience as an intimate encounter with the sacred. Taking Katz's critique into consideration they would agree with McGinn's description of mysticism as experiences of the sacred as "mediated immediacy."[42] How the sacred is identified may vary. For Thurman, the object of mystical experience is a transcendent deity. Thurman does not merely understand mysticism as being consigned to the realm of a transcendent "Other," however. Rather, as discussed above, Thurman sees mysticism as a part of a continuum that includes preparation, encounter, and a response. Mystical encounter is understood as authentic encounter only if it is concretely manifested in the world. While a transcendent deity is the object of religious experience for Thurman, he believes that when human

beings meet this deity, by way of mystical encounter, human beings meet a personal God who also relates to them intimately. This intimate interconnection or "the trysting place"[43] of mystical experience gives rise to a relationship of intersubjectivity. Within the interpenetrating boundaries of the mystical encounter, the individual is shielded and detached from an invasive culture and society and the human personality is restructured and redefined.[44] An individual who meets God in mystical experience is so inwardly transformed that she or he is compelled to respond to this encounter by way of embodied action.[45]

As a sociologist of religion, Alton Pollard inclusively focuses upon both the interior and exterior dimensions of mystical experience. Pollard is particularly concerned with the relationship between mystical experience and social activism (thus his emphasis on mystic-activism provides the potential of religious experience to bring about social change). Pollard defines mystical experience as "intimate discourse and practices that speak to what it means to be human in relationship to the transcendent and the mundane."[46] Pollard understands mysticism not as a way to escape the mundane world, but of becoming more deeply engaged in the struggle to transform it. Thus, for him the sacred space of intersubjectivity also encompasses dimensions of both the human and the transcendent.[47] Like Hollenbeck, however, he is unwilling to dismiss the notion of a priori religious experience.

In her book *Joy Unspeakable*, Barbara Holmes focuses primarily on the importance of contemplative practices in the lives of individual African Americans and in black churches. Drawing upon Thurman's work, Holmes argues that in African American contemplative practices the "Spirit and flesh . . . wrestle and embrace"[48] as the power of the transcendent infuses the plane of the mundane. African American contemplative practices create spaces for intimacy with the divine. In this fashion, "the mystical impulse within African-American religious traditions speaks to the need for the individual spirit to 'pause and rest' in intimate embrace with the divine and, thereby, shield itself from the 'Grand Invasion' of external impositions. At the same time, African American mysticism is understood as a source of knowledge, authority, and empowerment for prophetic and healing social engagement."[49]

It should be noted that the object of African American mystical experience may not be limited to a monotheistic deity. Divinity within the African and African diasporic context should be understood as multivocal. In his work on African mysticism, Kofi Opuku recognizes that in mystical experience "vital unity" occurs between human beings and divinity. He assumes, however, that divinity can be expressed in multiple forms and can include deities, spirits, ancestors, and nature spirits.[50] Dianne Stewart finds this to be the case in the Caribbean. She identifies this multiplicity as "the Divine Community." According to Stewart, it is precisely through visitations or "somatic epistemologies" that the Divine Community "assists the human community in its efforts to preserve wellness, transmit humanity, pursue liberationist transformative action, and establish countercultural codes" that counteract hegemonic and, more specifically, anti-African expressions[51] of symbolic and physical violence. This multivocal support is also central to an African American religious worldview. Chireau suggests that within the African American sacred-social network there exists "a host of forces that" directly intervene "in human life and its affairs, including spirits, ghosts, and angelic personalities that" are "periodically summoned to assist human beings in their endeavors."[52] Pollard refers to this inter-engagement of the divine and human community as the intersubjectivity of mystical encounter. It is within this relationship of intersubjectivity that African Americans claim intimacy with diverse objects/subjects of mystical experience.

This multivocal worldview also relates to the human personality. For example, in the West African view of the person, the self is not seen as unitary.[53] Rather, a person is a composite derived from, and influenced by, the constituents of a sacred-social network.[54] In West African traditional religions, these networks include relationships between divinity and humanity, between human beings and their ancestors, and among members of a living community.

> In the traditional religion of West Africa, the power of the gods and spirits was effectively present in the lives of men . . . on every level—environmental, individual, social, national, and cosmic. Aspects of reality . . . [were] placed within the context of social relationships.[55]

According to Raboteau, the individual person within this West African context is made up of different "spiritual components."[56] The individual as a personality-soul is dynamic[57] and deeply connected to the material world and the fluid relationships within its vast sacred-social network. Maintaining equilibrium is the fundamental goal for individuals and the community.[58] To achieve and maintain balance and harmony on individual and collective levels requires ongoing negotiation within the dynamic relationships of the community's sacred-social universe.

This sacred-social view of the world and the complex associations identified with the human personality stands in contrast to the dualistic assumptions of Western theology. In Augustine's theology, for example, while the ultimate goal is the ascent of the soul or finding a home with God, the perfection of the soul is achieved when the soul is separated from the body and goes home to be with God. The body/soul, spiritual/material dichotomy is indicative of Western dualistic thinking. The spiritual and the material or the corporeal are viewed as oppositional. "The human stain of sin" keeps human beings and God separate. God stands outside of creation and transcends the material world. In African cosmology, however, transcendence and immanence are not viewed as oppositional as they are in Western religious thought. In contrast to the Western tendency to polarize and assign hierarchical value to oppositional traits, the West African philosophical worldview assumes the coexistence of seeming opposites as a necessary component of the cosmic reality (e.g., male and female, the sacred and the profane, etc.). God both transcends the universe and at the same time is completely present within it.[59] Thus, human experience of the transcendent is not understood as the human ascent outside of or beyond human reality, as in Augustine's Neoplatonist thought. Rather, transcendence occurs even as the Divine Community becomes incarnate within divine—human interaction. The divine inhabits the material realm. This means that the religious devotee is not alienated from the body. The body is central to mystical experience in that the black African body serves as the site of this incarnation, of this divine—human interaction. Again, within this worldview the West African view of the personality-soul is dynamic, open, extended into its surrounding environment, and deeply connected

to the material world. Relationships within its sacred-social system are also dynamic. Anthony Pinn understands this focus on the human personality to be at the core of African American religions as well. Pinn argues that above all else, African American religions focus on religious engagement that supports the creation and maintenance of complex subjectivities that transcend systematic attempts to contain, circumscribe, or control individual and communal identity. I contend that this impulse toward complex subjectivity and vital cohesion is fundamental to nineteenth-century African American female mysticism. Multivocality and inter-engagement are basic elements of an African American female mysticism fashioned within the North American context.

It is important to remember that the multivocality of African American mysticism has developed and flourished within religiously and culturally pluralistic milieus. As a result of Western European colonialism and the modern slave trade, Africans arrived on the shores of the Americas as early as the sixteenth century from diverse geographical areas on the African continent. Consequently, both enslaved and free blacks came from diverse ethnic groups with diverse languages and religious expressions. Therefore, cross fertilization has necessarily occurred between European and African continental cultures as well as among racial and diverse ethnic groups in North America. This cross fertilization has resulted in regional and cross continental transmissions. European Western religious thought and practices have necessarily influenced and have been influenced by African American religious worldviews and practices in individual and collective ways. Thus, the language and constructs of how African Americans describe and interpret mysticism have both informed and have been informed by the various cultural strains that have converged in North America over the course of the last five centuries. Although medieval mysticism was centered in monastic life, religious life for nineteenth-century North American women was inspired by the evangelical call to missionary activism. Houchins sees these movements as profoundly related. The religious experiences of nineteenth-century African American women were necessarily informed by these movements and developed as black women asserted their right to "live and grow" while navigating the racial, sexual, and economic dynamics of the political, social, and religious fields of North American

culture. Houchins refers to nineteenth-century female mystics as black female "revivalists" and as part of the throng of those who were ushered into the American Christian movement along the wave of the Great Awakenings. At the same time, these women's religious experiences have been informed by an African American mystic culture that, as Pollard contends, is "indebted" to an African ethos and the religious rituals and practices of enslaved blacks.

Therefore, a definition of mysticism that would be flexible enough to include black women's religious experience in the scholarly discourse would (1) take seriously black women's focus on complex subjectivity and embodied action as fundamental aspects of their mystical activism (2) take into account the multivocality of black women's networks that make up their sacred-social worlds and (3) affirm the ways in which the body in black women's mystical experiences might serve as the means through which relationships within the sacred-social network are "discovered, re-created, and expressed."[60]

Nineteenth-century African American female mystical experiences centrally included incarnational practices and visitations that enabled individuals and communities to maintain and re-establish physical, psychological, social, and spiritual equilibrium. This function of mystical experience was especially crucial in light of the fragmenting effects symbolic and physical violence had on black bodies. A description of mysticism that would capture the spiritual, psychological, and social realities of nineteenth-century African American women then should address the dichotomies of classical Western Christian traditions. The focus in these women's experience is not upon a notion of union in which the self is annihilated or absorbed. Rather, in their mystical encounters with divinity, these women report having experienced an enlargement and empowerment of the self and an integration of complex subjectivities. As a result, nineteenth-century African American women understood their power and authority to be established in their relationship with a divinity who called, authorized, and empowered them to live lives actively pursuing spiritual growth and working to transform community. Although this empowerment is rooted in transcendence, rather than alienating the Subject from the material world as is so often espoused in the classical Western Christian

tradition, the experience compels her to become more deeply engaged in her social reality and more deeply integrated into the communal fabric of life. These women's mystical experiences demanded a concrete response that is demonstrated in their active lives.

Therefore, an approach to African American women's mystical activism should allow for integration, multivocality, and social engagement as well as consider black women's emphasis on space and place. African American women's mysticism is characterized by movement—it is spatial. Carmel Bendon Davis utilizes a spatial perspective in her analysis of medieval mystical texts. For Davis

> A spatial perspective permits the incorporation of multiple levels.... This spatial perspective allows mysticism to be understood as both social construct in its exterior representations and... interiorly as an authentic experience of God.[61]

Davis develops the concept of "mystical space" as a way of "defusing the divisive epistemological conceptions of mysticism that act against" the exploration of both the social and theological approaches to interpreting mystical experiences.[62] As I discussed above, Jim Flanagan has developed a trialectic of literary interpretation that takes us beyond a dialectical response to the historical and social dimensions of human reality to include spatial dimensions rooted in human experiences and praxis. Thus, "mystical space" includes the diverse dimensions of the devotee's life such as her experience of the divine, and the sociohistorical conditions, communities, religious influences, and physical social environments that have shaped her life and work.[63] Mystical space involves diverse "layers" that include social, subjective, and physical aspects of the practitioner's experiences as well as the expression of those experiences in textual forms.[64] Drawing upon Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, Davis's notion of mystical space not only recognizes how notions of divinity are "produced" by social actors but also how practitioners understand God as a producer. From the standpoint of the devotee, divinity is both the "container" of mystical space and is "contained" within the individual experiencer. Utilizing Van Gennep's theory of ritual

Davis argues that for the practitioner the divine serves as a container for her processual movement from "body-space to soul space."[65] Van Gennep's "tripartite processual movements" mark "changes of place, state, social position, and age in a culture."[66] The structure of this tripartite process includes separation, liminality, and reaggragation.

While Davis's concept of mystical space is developed to allow for the complex and multidimensional aspects of mystical life and its productions, she limits her consideration of mystical experiences to those that are contemplative, internal, and private. In her privileging of contemplative mystical experience, she utilizes Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice as her framework for contextualizing medieval mystical texts and concludes that "Christian mysticism can be understood as having its formation and expression in deeply ingrained Christian ideas and practices" and, therefore, "contributes to the continuance and enlargement of a Christian *habitus*." Davis argues that medieval mysticism supported and helped to perpetuate the institutional authority of churches. Davis uses her notion of mystical space to argue that these mystics are "conservative members of the Christian tradition who assist in the reproduction of the institution."[67] Davis is silent and uncritical, however, of the ways in which domination and exclusion are a part of that tradition.

In fact, in her discussion on Christian society she references Augustine's description of the communion of saints from his *City of God* as "the bond between *free* [emphasis mine] citizens of the polis, civitas, republica, congregation of heaven." In this description, Augustine establishes that "it is as this society . . . that we are saved."[68] Davis quotes Augustine to support an inclusive, multidimensional notion of society, but does not question or critique the exclusive aspects of Augustine's description and how his societal vision reflects the ways in which some persons are marginalized within the society—that is, the free versus the enslaved. Moreover, Davis exclusively privileges contemplative mystical experience and restricts her inquiry of mystical space to descriptions of contemplative practices and encounter. Thus, her definition of mysticism limits her notion of mystical space and does not allow for the kind of multivocality present in black women's spiritual traditions. Furthermore, Davis limits her discussion to what she

sees as mystical productions that fit neatly within the confines of institutional authority. The women who are the subjects of this study gained extra-institutional authority as a result of their visitations and mystical encounters. Again, as Copeland suggests, black female bodies provoke a theological critique to structural elements of domination such as those assumed by the imagery of Augustine's "City of God." Rachel Harding in her work with Afro-Brazilian religions argues that space is a critical category for analyzing African diasporic religiosity precisely because it allows us to interrogate the "unarticulated" spaces both to which the disenfranchised are relegated and those extra-institutional spaces in which the marginalized create "alternative orientations" and redefine their identities.[69] Rather than understanding these spaces as rigid containers she describes these spatial qualities as implying both boundary and movement.[70]

Although Davis's application of the concept of mystical space is problematic, the concept in and of itself could prove helpful. By exploring a notion of mystical space in which we can interrogate the boundaries and the movements of institutional and extra-institutional authority that inform black women's religiosity, perhaps we can get at the ways in which these women construct countercultural identities that critique dominating structures of authority and help to transform communities. Toward this end, I propose a theoretical perspective on mystical space as emancipatory space, as presented in nineteenth-century black women's spiritual autobiographies and narratives. Mystical space as emancipatory space for African American women would allow for a more ample multidimensionality that accommodates the multivocality of African American spirituality. Emancipatory mystical space must be inclusive of visitation and incarnational encounter alongside contemplative forms of mysticism. It is in this expanded inclusivity of emancipatory mystical space that mystical space can serve as a "trysting place" of intersubjectivity for nineteenth-century black women and the divine.

To summarize, African American mysticism is informed by the operating sacred-social worlds of religious practitioners. These sacred-social worlds are multivocal and include visitations from divine entities. Within the mystical space of these sacred-social worlds, divinity communicates with the human community and

human beings experience intimacy with the divine. This encounter of intersubjectivity provides human beings with extra-institutional forms of authoritative knowledge. Such experiences and knowledge claims enable women to embrace embodied ways of being and knowing in ways that counter symbolic and physical forms of structural violence. Consequently, the intersubjectivity that occurs within emancipatory mystical spaces gives rise to embodied action in the world. These visitations of ecstatic manifestations and visionary encounters provided meaning and clarity to these women's lives. Nineteenth-century African American women place high value on ecstatic, mystical experiences that served as signs of communication with the divine. These mystical experiences are constituent of an ongoing "divine dialogue" in which black women are affirmed and acknowledged as Subjects and agents of their own history.[71] This affirmation takes place within the boundaries and movements indicative of emancipatory mystical spaces—spaces of intersubjectivity, liminality, and divine mediation. Within these mystical spaces African American women are transformed and empowered to effect change in society. Thus, it is their mystical encounters and resultant sacred-social connections that enable these women to navigate, resist, and transcend systemic and local oppression and engage in countercultural action. In the next three chapters, I explore, by way of spiritual autobiography and narrative textual forms, the emancipatory mystical spaces that inform the mystical activism of three nineteenth-century African American women—Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, and Rebecca Cox Jackson.

3

Standing upon the Precipice: Community, Evil, and Black Female Subjectivity

Jarena Lee's *The Life and Religious Experience of Jarena Lee*, was first published in 1836. Later Lee published a more expanded account of her spiritual journey and ministerial travels in an 1849 edition. As the earliest known spiritual autobiography written by an African American woman, Lee's narrative serves as an important source for developing an understanding of African American female mysticism.[1] In this endeavor, Jarena Lee may serve as a paradigmatic figure for black female mystical activism. She is an archetypal persona parallel to the Orisha, lwa, or the ancestors who inhabit individuals via possession or revisit the living by being "re-born" through descendants during Yoruba or Vodou rituals. It is within this liminal space that these personas inform and commune with the gathered community. For the purposes of this study, Lee's text provides this incarnational, self-reflective, emancipatory mystical space in which the archetypal patterns of African American womanhood can inform our understanding of black female mysticism.

Lee was born in 1783 in Cape May, New Jersey. As a young black girl from a poor family, Lee was "hired out" at the age of seven and worked as a live-in domestic for the Sharp family who lived 60 miles from her home. Working-class parents (black and white) often hired out their children as a means of economic survival and stability.[2] Julia Foote reports a similar experience in her spiritual autobiography *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch by Mrs. Julia A. J. Foote*. Foote, who

J.R. Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism*

experienced her first "distinct religious impression" at the age of eight,[3] was hired out to the Prime family at the age of ten.[4] This means of child labor was preferred to other forms such as apprenticeships in that both parents and the child laborer had avenues of legal recourse open to them regarding the enforcement (and renegotiation for parents) of contracts and wage agreements. Even so, young children separated from their families whether enslaved or free and impoverished were placed in precarious situations. Separated from their families, African American children placed with or hired out to white families did not have the direct support of their biological family and extended kin system.[5] Children such as Lee who were displaced from their homes to provide labor and work as domestics for other families were also subjected to two systems of supervision—one immediate and one distant[6]—although much of "the normal dependency of childhood" would have been transferred to their employers and other members of the household staff.[7] Even though poor children "hired out" as laborers to more well-to-do families might have been informally "adopted," the household masters and mistresses often held paternalistic attitudes toward these children[8] and the children could be vulnerable to verbal, emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. Thus, this transfer of dependency for a child and the separation from her family would have been a cause of anxiety and concern for both the child and her biological family. Born into slavery and later emancipated at the age of 30 Elizabeth, "a colored minister of the gospel,"[9] describes this state of vulnerability and dependency that gives rise to feelings of anxiety and dislocation when she was sent away from her family.

> In the eleventh year of my age, my master sent me to another farm several miles from my parents, brothers and sisters, which was a great trouble to me. At last I grew so lonely and sad that I thought I should die, if I did not see my mother.[10]

Elizabeth also describes the physical violence she faced as a child. Denied permission by the overseer to visit her mother, she leaves the farm to travel 20 miles to stay with her mother for several days. As Elizabeth is leaving, her mother tells her that she has "nobody in the wide world to look to but God." Upon her return, the angry overseer ties her up and whips her giving her "some stripes of which" she "carried the marks for weeks."[11] She copes with her

lack of parental protection by committing herself to prayer and petitioning God for divine protection.

Although Lee does not report any such physical abuse she is, nevertheless, forced to navigate a coming of age period oftentimes without the immediate protection and guidance of her biological parents. Throughout her childhood, adolescence, and transition into young adulthood, Lee was placed with several different families and often lived miles from her parents' home. That these placements and displacements were a cause of anxiety and concern may be inferred from her descriptions of her relocations to the various households of her employers. In these descriptions, she highlights themes of space, place, alienation, and separation. For example, Lee writes that she was "parted from her parents" at the age of seven and then describes her first site of employment with the Sharp family as being "the distance of about sixty miles from the place of my birth."[12] Lee emphasizes the separation from her parents and how far she is from home—her place of birth. Her description even appears to suggest a kind of longing for her parents as a child placed alone with strangers. After that Lee next lived with a Catholic family in a remote rural area and would subsequently move around to work for other families. That Lee opens her spiritual autobiography with these descriptions of space, place, and longing situates her spiritual awakening and quest quite centrally within the context of dislocation and alienation. The themes of dislocation, alienation, and the search for home are foundational for Lee's spiritual awakening. She recounts how those around her, including her parents and her employers, were not equipped or willing to instruct her in "the knowledge of God."[13] Lee indicates the lack of support she may have felt from her biological family and formal and informal kinship systems. This speaks not only to her feelings of physical dislocation but also of her feelings of spiritual separation. It is this sense of separation and dislocation, precipitated by structural norms of class and race-based exploitation of labor, which also inform Lee's spiritual awakening and eventual conversion to Christianity. In Julia Foote's narrative, we find a more explicit critique of these structural dynamics and the ways in which they can cause children seeking spiritual guidance to feel alienated and disconcerted. Foote describes how, during a communion service, her mother and "another colored sister" waited for the white

congregants to receive communion. Just when they were ready to advance, "two of the poorer class of white folks" approached the table. Foote reports that "a mother in Israel caught hold of my mother's dress and said to her, 'Don't you know better than to go to the table when white folks are there?'"[14] Foote problematizes this kind of spiritual leadership that accommodates class and racial distinctions.

> The Spirit of Truth can never be mistaken, nor can he inspire anything unholy. How many at the present day profess great spirituality, and even holiness, and yet are deluded by a spirit of error, which leads them to say to the poor and the colored ones among them, "Stand back a little—I am holier than thou."[15]

Lee's spiritual awakening also occurred at an early age. She reports that her conscience is pricked when, soon after she began working for this family at the age of seven, she told "the lady" of the house a lie. Lee is so overtaken by feelings of guilt that she vows to never lie again. She goes on to report, however, that her "heart grew harder." Still, she testifies as to how the "spirit of the Lord…continued mercifully striving with [her] until [God's] gracious power converted [her] soul."[16] Womanist, feminist, and scholars of African American religions have been critical regarding assessments of Christian conversions of African Americans and women who claim experiences of guilt and sin consciousness as salvific.

Renee Harrison argues that the sin consciousness that accompanies Christian conversion is self-debasing and is part of the religio-cultural oppression African Americans faced at the hands of white missionaries.[17] Using Jarena Lee's initial awakening as an example, Harrison argues that "Christian conversion became a public and private ritualized process by which…Lee, and other converted blacks came to think of themselves as tragically African and sinfully human, unworthy beings in the sight of God."[18] Harrison contends that Lee's conversion is an example of cultural debasement. She goes on to say that any

> conversion experience that causes one to feel shame and wretched, and requires one to negate his or her personhood, is…[a] devaluation of one's humanity and soul-life for someone else's benefit.

Although Stewart agrees with Harrison's essential argument that Christian missionary programs have resulted in cultural debasement and an "anthropological impoverishment" that has given rise to anti-African attitudes, she also recognizes that the faith testimonies of enslaved African Christians also suggest that some of them had overwhelming existential and mystical encounters with the Christian God and Jesus Christ."[19] For some, Jesus served as "a divine incarnation with whom they could identify"[20] and as "the resurrected Christ, resolved the existential problems of defeat, anonymity, and personal worthlessness."[21] Like Harrison, Rebecca Ann Elliott also recognizes the violent images that are a part of nineteenth-century black women's conversion narratives. Elliott attributes this to "their crushing anxiety and fear of Satan and damnation."[22] Elliott argues, however, that the conversion experiences of African American women such as Jarena Lee are informed by a positive anthropology. She goes further to argue that black women's inward spiritual journeys enables them to exercise human agency, to battle against evil, and become liberated from the fear of sin and evil. This was the first step in the journey toward perfection and "liberation from the fear of 'otherness.'"[23]

Harrison and Stewart make important arguments regarding the destructive and demonizing effects of European and American missionary efforts and the religio-cultural oppression resulting from Christian hegemony. At the same time, while it is Harrison's contention that the language used in conversion narratives such as Jarena Lee's description of her initial conviction is indicative of a missionary program of cultural debasement and how even many African Americans came to accept the notion of blacks as "tragically African," perhaps this is not the whole story. When we take into account the complex subjectivities of free and once-enslaved African Americans who draw from the cultural streams of the Aboriginal-European-African habitus of North America, it is important to consider how different individuals and local groups constructed their religious identities. This requires us to ask certain questions. First of all, can we assume that certain converts or groups of converts were formally practicing or exposed to traditional African-derived religions and explicitly rejected these religions for Christianity? What were the religious traditions and practices that were circulating within the cultural milieu

that would have established the matrix of perceptions individuals and groups used to navigate the religious, cultural, and social fields they inhabited? Even if African Americans converted to Christianity as a means of acceptance how do we account for what Stewart describes as "overwhelming . . . mystical encounters" with the God of Christianity and Jesus Christ? Does the use of the language of "sin consciousness" and human wretchedness mean that African American converts have actually internalized feelings of human worthlessness and inferiorized blackness that can only serve to perpetuate structures of domination? To what extent do black women use the language of sin consciousness as rhetorical[24] strategies and employ these strategies as literary conventions in their autobiographies and spiritual narratives?

In his work on autobiography and conversion, James Craig Holt argues that conversion experiences depicted in North American spiritual autobiographies are based on the literary patterns and conventions established in Quaker and Puritan colonial narratives that are in turn rooted in older European autobiographical conventions. Holt observes, for example, that Puritan spiritual narratives were penned to "establish the author's sanctification" and membership in a local congregation. Puritan conversion narratives followed the formulas established by "the European Reformed theologians who emphasized the depravity of man, the power of God, and the irresistible nature of grace."[25] These conversion narratives consist in a three-part formula through which a practitioner describes a sinful pre-conversion life, the experience of conversion itself, and the manifestations (both spiritual and physical) of the conversion experience that legitimate the devotee's place within the practicing community.[26] Thus, the Protestant conversion narrative represented a structure for individual identity, status, and place within the religious community. The Protestant conversion narratives fit the structure of threefold progression of ritual found in the work of Van Gennep and Victor Turner. Again, Van Gennep's ritual process consists of (1) separation or the pre-liminal stage where a person or persons are "detached from a fixed point in the social structure or earlier set of social conditions," (2) the marginal or the liminal stage in which the person's status is "ambiguous" and the Subject is "no longer in the old state," but has not yet arrived at the new state, and (3) aggregation or the post-liminal state

in which the person "enters into a new stable state with its own rights and obligations."[27] Turner identifies rituals that marked transitions or change of status as life-crisis rituals. Life-crisis rituals mark a subject or groups movement from one life-phase to another. Turner argues that these ritual processes take place on social fields or "the groups, relationships, and social-structural organizational principles of the society in which the rituals are performed."[28]

The groups, network of relationships, social structures, and organizations operating in nineteenth-century North America were in many ways culturally and ethnically diverse and complex. The African, Native American, and European ethnic and cultural groups that populated the American landscape practiced forms of "life-crisis" rituals that were integral parts of their indigenous social structures. The dominance of Euro Christianity and the related systems of the slavery and missionization, however, had a suppressive, even destructive impact upon the social and religious systems of Native American and African cultures and the ability of these groups to openly and fully maintain these systems. For Africans who ended up in what would become the United States, the forms of symbolic and physical violence meted out by those who were involved in the slave trade such as geographical displacement, separating Africans from the same language and ethnic groups, forbidding the use of musical instruments, punishing persons for practicing cultural and religious forms or demonizing these forms, and the African proximity to slave owners made it difficult if not impossible for Africans to maintain the complex structures and rituals that supported individual and group movement through life crisis in their respective homelands. This does not mean, however, that these structures were destroyed and became wholly nonexistent in the nineteenth century. In fact, in a few geographical areas, such as New Orleans, "Voodoo" organizations thrived until the latter part of the period.[29] In a broader way, African-based structures took up residence in other religious and cultural forms, for example, the spirituals and the ring shout especially in the South. Raboteau even suggests that enslaved African Americans may have interpreted such evangelical Protestant ritual processes as conversion through the lens of West African initiation rites. These African Americans "seek" out the conversion experience

and describe this quest as a period of "mourning" in which the seeker or sinner departs from the group, and goes alone to a "quiet place to struggle with [her] sins."[30] In this case, sin consciousness is identified with displacement and anxiety for the seeker. The question is whether the language of sin consciousness along with declarations of wretchedness always or even usually indicates that the seeker actually feels devoid of value as a human being or uses the language as either a rhetorical strategy or an invocation or what Stewart refers to as incantation.

To Raboteau's point, Paul Radin contends that the antebellum African American was not converted to the Christian God, rather:

> [She] converted God to [her]self. In the Christian God [she] found a fixed point and [she] needed a fixed point, for both within and outside of [her]self [she] could see only vacillation and endless shifting.[31]

According to this contention then, African American converts recognized a processual structure in the Christian conversion ritual to which they were already disposed as a part of their habitus. The language of sin consciousness as a part of the structured process of moving from pre-conversion to conversion serves as an invocational tool for this process. This does not mean that we can wholly dismiss Harrison's contention that the language of sin consciousness might, nonetheless indicate some kind of assent to the symbolic violence of cultural debasement, rather it does suggest that the desire by African Americans for Christian conversion may involve greater layers of complexity as well as in some respects an assertion of an African-oriented habitus recreated in or adapted through Christian ritual processes.

To Harrison's point, however, Holt suggests that while testimonies regarding the sinful nature of converts and devotees are typical as a literary convention of Protestant conversion narratives, feelings of worthlessness and wretchedness seem to be particularly emphasized in female conversion narratives. Moreover, Graham Russell Hodges adds that enslaved Africans who converted to Christianity typically experienced profound instances of anxiety and dread that particularly characterize African Christian conversions.[32] One can conclude that these

groups might have misrecognized the symbolic violence of cultural debasement and internalized a sense of worthlessness as marginalized classes within the North American context. Although it might be that the marginalized status of being female or of African descent accounts for the propensity of these populations toward more specific language of sin consciousness, it might also be argued that communal legitimation of these marginalized persons within Christian communions and the larger culture called for such rhetorical strategies to mitigate or avoid the perceived threat that these populations might pose as persons who dare to claim status and exert power within the religious field.

At the same time these converts, as Radin suggests, in need of a fixed point of identity in the midst of the "vacillation and endless shifting" of the matrix of domination converted God to themselves and, moreover, utilized the structured process of Christian conversion to establish an empowered identity in community. This need for empowered identity in community and the understanding that structured ritual processes were necessary to obtain this new identity may be indicated by Lee's complaint that no one had "instructed" her in these "matters" or that in the heat of her conviction she did not know "how to run immediately to the Lord for help."[33] As a young woman struggling with dislocation and anxiety she was searching for the path she could take or the tools she could employ to access the divine. Drawing from the strategies available to her in the North American religious habitus she utilizes the language of sin consciousness as a mark of an "initiation" into the threefold Christian life-crisis ritual of conversion.

In this threefold conversion ritual, Lee's description of the pre-conversion part of her life that would lead to her eventual conversion continues in 1804 when she was in her early twenties. She describes traveling with a group to hear a Presbyterian preacher. Lee writes that her conviction was renewed at the reading and hearing of a psalm in which the seeker writes that he is "vile," "conceived in sin," and "born unholy and unclean."[34] Lee understood this Psalm to be descriptive of her own status.[35] Her incorporation of the language of "sin consciousness" is consistent with the language Harrison rejects as indicative of cultural debasement. Lee, however, does not identify this sinful

condition with being African. Rather, she identifies sin as telling of the human condition. Again, Elliott argues that despite African American women's use of the language of sin consciousness, black women such as Lee maintained a positive understanding of their humanity. In her autobiography Lee, even as a young woman, traveled and actively sought out a religious community that would liberate her from the "fear of 'otherness'" and resolve her sense of alienation and displacement. Lee believes that humanity is mired in and corrupted by human sin and separation from the divine. Her descriptions of her awakening and conviction speak to how she sees her relationship to this human condition and her participation in it. One could argue that Lee employs the literary conventions of the North American Protestant spiritual narratives to signal her feelings of profound alienation and displacement. It may also be that she understood the literary conventions at play and used the more extreme language of the literary form as a rhetorical strategy in order to placate the mores of respectability and acceptability even as she laid claim to full authority as a member of the baptized community. By claiming fully inclusion within the conversion narrative tradition, Lee also may have been better able to accrue spiritual capital within the North American religious field. At the same time, Lee sought genuine conversion. In her interpretation of this Psalm in which she identifies with the "sinful nature" associated with the human condition, her perceived awareness of the this condition makes her desirous of the practical knowledge, tools, and skills to approach the divine for help and assistance. She claims, however, to be unaware of what she should do to gain divine assistance. Yet, she uses the language of sin consciousness as initiation into the threefold Christian ritual of conversion.

Next, Lee writes that she is driven by Satan to go to a brook and drown herself. She reports that it is the "unseen arm of God [that] saved" her from taking her own life. Lee characterizes this struggle as one in which she is dealing with alienation, separation, and the threat of death. Sin serves as the basis for this separation, anxiety, and fear. Lee experiences episodic attacks that occurred over a period of four to five years. During this time, Lee is tormented by what she described as a demonic force that takes

hold of her and tempts her to "destroy her life." While episodes of distress are a part of the Western mystical heritage, these episodes are mostly associated with feeling abandoned by God.[36] Lee does not directly state that she feels abandoned by divinity. The question is then are there other factors or circumstances that precipitated what we would refer to today as suicidal ideation. The essential problem with attempting to answer this question is that Lee's text does not offer much additional information. In her written text, Lee attributes her feelings of terror and distress in the face of these threats exclusively to the supernatural machinations of Satan—a force of evil that takes on a life of its own, devouring and destroying those in its wake. The question is does Lee only consider Satan as representative of supernatural forms of evil? Or is there a relationship between Satan as a supernatural force of evil and Lee's material conditions?

We do have an indication that Lee may have suffered from feelings of abandonment as a child taken from her home and placed with a strange family. This may be telling of the negative effects of the operating economic structures and labor practices that included child labor. As a child "hired out," Lee functions as a transactional body in the economic field of North America. She is vulnerable, separated from her family at an early age. As a transactional body her desires and skills were extracted and she was coerced during her formative years to support the existing economic and familial structures. It is reasonable to assume that fear and alienation would result. Fear, anxiety, lack of self-worth, violence, and trauma have a fragmenting, disintegrative effect upon the human personality, upon the human soul that could give rise to a crisis of the self, rooted not only in a fear of possible spiritual annihilation but also in potential physical and/or psychological obliteration by systemic violence. Lee and other black females constantly struggled with the threat of death, fragmentation, or self-annihilation on spiritual, physical, and psychological levels. Lee seemed to be constantly engaging in a quest for divine succor and social sustenance. She was in need of a structured remedy to meet her psychological and spiritual needs as well as a community that could assist her in her search for wholeness.

After Lee is terrorized by and battling with these thoughts of suicide her account shifts as she describes having her eyes opened. Subsequently, she finds herself standing on a precipice-overlooking hell.

> But notwithstanding the terror which seized upon me, when about to end my life, I had no view of the precipice on the edge of which I was tottering, until it was over, and my eyes were opened. Then the awful gulf of hell seemed to be open beneath me, covered only, as it were by a spider's web, on which I stood.[37]

Lee's mystical vision of hell echoes the conversion narratives of enslaved African Americans who testified regarding visions or dreams that include themes of mystical travel.[38] Elizabeth experienced a similar view of hell. In her narrative she describes how in a vision a guide leads her "down a long journey to a fiery gulf, and left" her "standing upon the brink of this awful pit."[39] In slave narratives other African American women and men relate how, during visions of mystical travel, the "little" woman or man would come out of the old person and the little woman or man would see the old self suspended over hell by a spider's web. In these radical encounters with God, the person's soul went on a journey and she or he gained knowledge through the specific images and instructions unveiled. The "little" woman or man would come out of the old person and the soul would see the "little" self suspended over, and looking down on a vision of hell. Alternatively, the soul would take flight to heavenly realms. Below, an ex-slave named Mary recounts the vision she experiences at the time of her conversion.

> The power of God struck me, and a little man appeared and said, "My little one follow me." Then as quick as a flash, little Mary came out of the old Mary and I stood looking down on old Mary lying at hell's dark door.[40]

Descriptions such as Mary's are similar to the Vodou notion of the "little angel" or the *ti bon anj*—that aspect of the self that allows for self-reflection and examination. Earl identifies those who experience these visions as participant-witnesses in these visionary conversions.[41] For these individuals, these visions enable

them to catch a glimpse of a self in relation to sin and evil that is not directly mediated by their slave masters.

> But it seemed like the more I prayed, the worse I got. I felt like I had the burden of the world on my shoulders.... I began to see the wondrous works of God. I saw myself on the very brink of hell. I was on a little something that was swinging back and forth, and it looked as if I must surely fall at any minute.[42]

Riggins Earl argues that in the visionary conversion experiences described above, enslaved African Americans took part in a mode of interactive communication with the divine. The little woman or man served as participant-witness during these encounters in which the old self traveled to the depths of hell and ascended to the heights of heaven. As participant-witnesses black women and men experienced a vision of the self that transcended the slave master's definitions. This transcendence provided the participant-witness with a critical lens through which to view not only the master class but also her sociohistorical reality. The visionary conversion experience created a space in which the convert disengaged from the ideology of white supremacy in order to become reengaged with her world.

According to Earl, however, it is not the "old" personality that participates in this reengagement, rather it is a "new" person armed with a mission and a radically different worldview. The new person is "interiorly distanced" from the psychological and spiritual violence of chattel slavery and is called to a new understanding of divine purpose and mission. According to Earl, God showed the convert not only who she was but who she was to become. Thus, the role of the participant-witness in African American mystical visions was crucial. The mind of the colonized individual is programmed to misrecognize and to distrust his or her own view of a world in which her humanity is valued and affirmed. Interior distancing, however, not only gave the convert a greater ability to critique the slave master and reject the slave master's worldview, but also allowed her to engage in self-critique that is a critical element of human agency. Charles Long writes that for African American people who were enslaved

> God has been more often a transformer of their consciousness, the basis for a resource that enabled them to maintain the human

> image without completely acquiescing to the norms of the majority population. He provided a norm of self-criticism that was not derivative from those who enslaved them.[43]

Long argues that enslaved women and men conformed to the slave master's definition of their roles in society out of fear and concerns for survival. When "colonized persons become aware of their autonomy and independence," however, and no way is provided for such persons to express their essential humanity, resistance is inevitable.[44] Long suggests that the emancipatory context created by mystical space transports the slave through memory and historical imagination to a primordial place where no master/slave dichotomy exists. As a result, the converted soul sees a vision of a new humanity and new community beyond the "misrecognized" worldview established by the slave master.

It is evident that Lee is influenced by the North American habitus informed by the cultures of contact. Not only does her mystical vision of being suspended over the pit of hell echo the testimonies of the slave narratives, but her description of the spider's web is also reminiscent of the imagery Jonathan Edwards uses in his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

> O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned in hell. You hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder.[45]

In his sermon Edwards warns sinners that they are facing impending doom. He portrays the Christian God as a deity whose wrath and anger condemns the unrepentant sinner to eternal damnation. Humanity is powerless in the face of this wrathful God to secure refuge since human righteousness, as Edwards puts it, has "no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock."[46] The use of imagery similar to Edwards's metaphor is also presented by another African American evangelical John Jea. Jea describes his own vision of "seeing myself hanging over the brink

of a burning hell, only by the brittle thread of life."[47] In both Jea and Edward's imagery the thread or the spider's web is impotent, incidental, and threadbare. These images represent human powerlessness and the fragility of human nature in light of the threat of sin. The hand of God, however, represents divine grace as the ever-present, sole, unfailing power that can save a human being from the bowels of hell.

While Edwards uses the image of the spider's web to allude to unrepentant humanity's damnation and powerlessness, Lee reimagines the spider's web as the hand of God. The spider's web as the hand of God represents the divine as a source of power and enabling grace that provides the space for her eyes to be opened to the awfulness of evil and sin in the world. In her vision of the "fiery gulf" Elizabeth also feels that she is "sustained by some invisible power." Moreover, she uses the metaphor of a hand to represent this power.[48] Lee seems to be assured of the ability of this divine power to support her as she confronts what she understands to be the reality of sin and evil with open eyes. Lee is not hanging by the thin threads of a spider's web that may break at any time and cast her into hell, rather she is standing securely upon it. The spider's web as the hand of divinity in some ways is akin to the hoodoo "hand" or the bakongo nkisi that consists of material items related to ancestors and is believed to protect and guard the human soul. The bakongo nkisi or minkisi serves as a hiding place to keep and compose a person's soul in order to preserve her life.[49] A hand serves as a container for material items that represent elements of the cosmos. It also acts as a repository for collective memory.[50] Lee's reimagining of the spider's web suggests the influence of the North American habitus and the African and African American constituent streams. While she utilizes the rhetorical moves of Edwards as a part of the Protestant Christian literary tradition, she also embodies elements of African worldviews and symbols as well their North American adaptations.

Lee's vision of the spider's web serves as a mystical space in which Lee's body-soul, that is, her self is guarded and protected as she engages in critical reflection of her own soul-status and the broader human condition. The mystical space of the spider's web as God's hand provides the context for the mediation of divine power. It is a space of mystical intersubjectivity in which Lee communes with the

sacred-social world of an African American habitus and ancestral musings echo and resound. It is here that Lee's eyes are opened. The opening of her eyes indicates Lee's recognition of the precariousness of the human condition and the pervasiveness of evil. It suggests that she has been made more aware of the possible threats that evil and sin pose to her own physical and spiritual well-being. In her vision of the spider's web, Jarena Lee as a participant-witness discovers a vision not only of the self but also of the structure of her world. Looking into the gulf of hell, Lee apprehends the spiritual and social contours of the lattices of power that overlay the matrix of domination. In the wake of this knowledge, Lee as a poor, black female is divinely empowered to resist the debilitating power of evil and recognize it for what it is. She sees herself and her world with "open eyes." It is this "open-eyed-ness" that has enabled black women such as Jarena Lee to navigate the complex interconnections and dynamics of social sin and structural evil.

Thus, Lee's image of the spider's web serves as a metaphor for mystical space and the sacred-social world of African American mysticism. Her visionary experience also points to the strategies nineteenth-century black women used to confront evil and oppression. Within the liminal space of these mystical experiences, African American women and men understand themselves as becoming interiorly distanced or disengaged *by* the power of God *from* the power and structures of evil. The spider's web as emancipatory mystical space provides a sheltered container in which seekers can confront the difficulties of the human condition. Thus, while Jonathan Edwards, in his sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," uses the image of the spider's web to allude to unrepentant humanity's damnation, Lee reimagines the spider's web and uses it to signify the sacred power that enables her to recognize and contend with sin and evil.

The First I Knew of Myself: Deification and the Erotic

Above, we saw how, through her mystical experience, Jarena Lee reclaimed her life from the grips of fear and potential death and annihilation. Below, Lee describes her moment of conversion while sitting in a worship service. The mystical aspects of her

visionary experience mark a profound instance of transformation. In the midst of a church service among a company of parishioners, Lee experiences a vision:

> That instant, it appeared to me, as if a garment, which had entirely enveloped my whole person, even to my fingers ends, split at the crown of my head, and was stripped away from me… when the glory of God seemed to cover me in its stead.
>
> That moment, though hundreds were present, I did leap to my feet and declare that God, for Christ's sake, had pardoned the sins of my soul. Great was the ecstasy of my mind.… For a few moments I had the power to exhort sinners, and to tell of the wonders and of the goodness of him who had clothed me with *his* salvation.[51]

Houchins observes that in this passage Lee's orientation borders "on the erotic when the metaphor of nudity to express both vulnerability and innocence is coupled with the sensuous depiction of nakedness and ecstasy to create a dynamic tension."[52] In *A Brand Plucked from the Fire, An Autobiographical Sketch*, Julia Foote describes a similar vision replete with sensual imagery:

> My hand was given to Christ, who led me into the water and stripped me of my clothing, which at once vanished from sight. Christ then appeared to wash me, the water feeling quite warm.… When the washing was ended, the sweetest music I had ever heard greeted my ears. We walked to the shore, where an angel stood with a clean, white robe.[53]

Foote's text goes on to describe how the Holy Spirit gave her delicious fruit and she sat down with a company of heavenly beings and ate it. She also reports that Christ came to her. He wrote words on a paper with a golden pen and then placed them in her bosom to carry with her. Finally, she describes how the entire company embraced her at a shining gate.[54]

Erotic images and sensuality have long been a part of the mystical lexicons of various religious traditions. For nineteenth-century black women who often experience vulnerability and exposure coupled with the shame of denigration and the pain of psychic and bodily violence, the presence of the erotic and sensuality in their mystical encounters is quite profound. Claiming the creative

power of the erotic for African American women counters the exploitive use often made of black female bodies for white and male consumption. In her classic essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," Audre Lorde describes the erotic as a positive, vital, and primary organizing force for what it means to *be*, individually and collectively. The erotic acts as an "internal guide," or as "an epistemological reservoir"[55] that informs human agency. Lorde's description of the erotic and how it functions in the human personality is deeply linked to women's passions and desires. Dominating structures and institutions seek to co-opt or control female desire. Thus, oppression can have an erosive effect on black women's personalities. Emancipatory mystical space leads to the "rearrangement of the coercion of [female] desire"[56] so that African American women can draw from and utilize their own erotic resources and vitality to more deeply engage in community building.

Lee admits that she is "naturally of a lively turn of disposition," yet her excursions into what she called "vanities" seem to deplete her and send her into bouts of depression.[57] Lee seeks vitality and "holy energy" for her life and work. In this instance, however, she refers to "*one* sin" that seems to be draining her of her power. The garment that was stripped away was a garment of malice and resentment that had taken over her whole being. The all-encompassing nature of this sin may have also affected her vitality. The erotic fundamentally refers to a person's vital forces. Tapping into the erotic is critical to harvesting and cultivating these vital energies. In touching and claiming this vital force, Lee is touching and claiming home. M. Shawn Copeland describes the crucial role embodiment and eros play in the black female quest for space and place. Copeland contends, "Through the struggle to achieve and exercise freedom in history and society . . . the black [female] body" becomes "a site of divine revelation."

> Eros as embodied spirituality suffuses and sustains depth or value-laden experiences and relationships. . . . Eros enhances our capacity for joy and knowledge, honors and prompts our deepest yearnings for truth and life, and validates our refusal of docility and submission in the face of oppression. Eros steadies us as we reach out to other bodies in reverence, passion, and compassion, resisting every temptation to use or assimilate the other and the Other for our

> own self-gratification, purpose, or plan Eros empowers and affirms life.[58]

As stated above, as a laborer "hired out" by her family to various white households Lee functioned in many ways as a transactional body. Therefore, her desires and skills were used to support the existing economic and familial structures. They were not fully available for her to utilize and invest in her own passions. Vital union with the divine, however, enables Lee to touch, claim, and cultivate the vital force within. In the company of those gathered, Lee marshals her own vital resources and exercises the power to exhort those gathered, silencing the male minister presiding over the proceedings. Within the mystical space of her conversion, Lee becomes enfleshed deity and gives birth to new gender and racial arrangements as she mediates divinity within the gathered community.

Thus, mystical encounter as embodied soul experience counteracts the exploitive practices exercised by institutional authorities and those with more status and power in society. It also counters tactics of direct and symbolic violence that serve to separate black souls from black bodies. Lee claims a kind of newness similar to the sentiment expressed in the words of the African American spiritual quoted from Riggins Earl above, "I looked at my hands and they were new, I looked at my feet and they were too." Here Earl employs the words of this spiritual to refer to an interior as well as an exterior transformation that reveals an "embodied soul consciousness."[59] These are processes of subjectivity in which persons who are objectified by an oppressive system recognize and assert themselves as Subjects in resistance to, and rejection of, externally imposed definitions. They do this through the inter-engagement of mystical intersubjectivity whereby the practitioner achieves an awareness of the ground of her own consciousness.[60] According to Mary Frohlich, this transformation occurs when a mediating Subject appropriates this self-awareness into her own consciousness. Through the emancipatory mystical space of her conversion, Lee serves as a mediating Subject who appropriates a self-awareness of her own erotic power. By achieving what Pollard refers to as "vital cognition" of this power Lee is transformed.

Thurman discusses this movement of transformative appropriation in a way that recalls Van Gennep's third stage of ritual—reaggregation. Thurman suggests that transformative appropriation also involves the ability of the convert to "work over" and assimilate the "raw materials" of her religious experience in ways that these raw materials, in this case erotic, vital power, becomes a part of "what [s]he defines as [her] own person, [her] own personality, or [her] own self." Moreover, I would argue that the significance of the erotic lies not only in the internal appropriation of the "raw materials" but also in the public demonstration of the erotic, vital power of women such as Lee and Foote in the company of the sacred-social community.[61] For these women mystical encounter not only provided them with a sense of intimacy and care for their persons but also loosed their own vital power within the public sphere.

The effect of this transformation upon Lee is profound in that in a moment of ecstasy and rapture, Lee, as mentioned above, is given and exercises the power to exhort in the company of the congregation. The role of the participant-witness within the sacred social community is an important one. For African Americans marginalized from the dominate culture and dehumanized by ecclesial structures, the mediating power of the divine affirms black humanity and the relationship between black humanity and divinity. This affirmation counters symbolic and direct forms of violence. Vital union in this instance provides Lee with communal authority as one who mediates divine presence.[62]

After she conquered fear and anxiety and began her ministry of exhortation, Lee was determined to grow in her knowledge of divinity and the Christian faith to which she was called. In the next stages of Lee's spiritual quest, she begins to struggle in what she calls "a laboring of the mind." She was passionate about wanting to "know more of the right way of the Lord." The intellectual nature of this struggle testifies to Lee's desire not only to obtain emotional and psychological freedom but also spiritual and intellectual freedom in understanding the "nature" of divinity, her relationship with God, as well as her ethical responsibilities as a new creation "clothed" with divine salvation. Thus, through her visionary experience, Lee was liberated spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally from the fear and anxiety she associated with human sin and evil forces. At the same time, however, Lee continued to

desire an ever-deepening communion with God. To achieve this deeper communion Lee writes that she retired to a "secret place" and prayed for God to do an even "greater work" in her life. As she prayed, Lee was overwhelmed by God's presence.

> That very instant, as if lightning had darted through me, I sprang to my feet, and cried, "The Lord has sanctified my soul!"…The first I knew of myself after that, I was standing in the yard with my hands spread out, and looking with my face toward heaven.
>
> So great was the joy, that it is past description. There is no language that can describe it, except that which was heard by St. Paul when he was caught up to the third heaven, and heard words which was not lawful to utter.[63]

Themes of deification or divinization are a part of the classical Western mystical tradition. According to McGinn, the mystical language of deification is linked to scriptural and Greek philosophical ideas of being created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26) and the "soul's assimilation to God."[64] Through deification the soul is restored or assimilated to the divine image. Through sanctification human beings are able to experience "spiritual communion" with God.[65] The notion that humans can become "god-like" necessitates a positive understanding of what it means to be human. As stated earlier, Elliott contends that because of their emphasis on sanctification women such as Lee embrace a positive anthropology despite using the rhetoric of sin consciousness. Similarly, itinerant evangelist Zilpha Elaw describes the positive anthropology of sanctification-deification in her narrative.

> God was pleased to separate my soul unto, Himself, to sanctify me as a vessel designed for honour…my spirit seemed to ascend up up into the clear circle of the sun's disc; and, surrounded and engulfed in the glorious effulgence of his rays, I dinstinctly heard a voice speak unto me, which said, "Now thou art sanctified."[66]

She believed she could strive for "perfection" and become like the divine in holiness. Lee's exclamation the "first I knew of myself" after being sanctified, set apart by God for a divine purpose provides a way for us to talk about the process of black women's Subjectivity. Lee withdrew to a "secret place" to pray. Oftentimes withdrawal[67] is a necessary step for women to detach from the

influences, interruptions, and impositions that often affect their spiritual and intellectual lives. Lee, as did so many other women, understood that in order to truly engage in soul contemplation, in order to discover the true self and the true nature of divine vision and God's will, one must remove oneself from the distractions of culture and community, and talk directly to the Source of one's hopes and dreams.

With this detachment, Lee is positioned to receive an enlarged understanding of self and the universe in which she lived. In the widening of her consciousness and intellectual insight her mystical experience continues to transform her worldview. Lee writes that it was "as if lightening had darted" through her. Lightning is imagery that is present in all three spiritual narratives of the African American female Subjects of this book. For Lee, the imagery of lightning expresses the intensity and pervasiveness of divine illumination that she experiences and also perhaps an expansion of the living principle and vitality within. As this holy energy of vitality and illumination infuses her body, Lee is struck by a mystical revelation—a new consciousness of the self that is not bound by the controlling images or narrow constructs generated out of the matrix of domination. Instead, this new consciousness arises out of a direct encounter with the source or ground of Lee's very being. Lee's understanding of self is now wholly governed by what she recognizes as the vision and purpose of God. As a result, she has divine knowledge and clarity that not only empowers her by providing her with a clear sense of self and purpose but also continues to provide her with an awareness of the ever-present forces of evil that attempt to thwart the divine will. With open eyes she recognizes the ways in which the tools and weapons of structural evil are used to sow seeds of confusion and self-doubt in the minds of those it seeks to subjugate. Lee now stands ready once again to confront the raging force of evil and to overcome.

4

God I Didn't Know You Were So Big: Apophatic Mysticism and Expanding Worldviews

Sojourner Truth was born Isabella in the late 1790s on Roundout Creek in Rosendale, Ulster County, in the state of New York. A Colonel Ardinburgh owned her parents, James and Betsy. Isabella's father, James was given the name "Bomefrey" (low Dutch for "tree") because of his tall stature. Betsy or Mau-Mau Bett, as she was called, gave birth to 10 or perhaps 12 children. Isabella was the youngest and only knew six of her siblings. The rest were sold to other owners. Ardinburgh died when Isabella was still an infant. The Colonel's son Charles inherited his father's property, including those he enslaved. Under Charles Ardinburgh, Isabella's family as well as all of Ardinburgh's other enslaved blacks lived in a cellar beneath a house that was converted into a hotel. In the cellar, there was little sunlight and the floor was often covered with mud. The men, women, and children who shared this cellar suffered from diseases and ailments resulting in bodies that were often contorted and tortured by pain.[1]

At the age of nine, Isabella was sold to John Nealy. Under the ownership of the Nealys Isabella endured many beatings and lashings, the scars of which she would bear throughout her life. As a child, Isabella's mother taught her and her siblings strategies that she felt would assist them in their survival within the oppressive system of slavery. Mau-Mau Bett would sit with her children during the evening under the stars and teach them how to call upon God to help them in times of crisis.

> "My children, there is a God, who hears and sees you." "A *God*, mau-mau! Where does he live?" asked the children. "He lives in the

J.R. Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism*

> sky," she replied; "and when you are beaten, or cruelly treated, or fall into any trouble, you must ask help of him, and he will always hear and help you."[2]

Influenced by the Afro-Dutch culture and the Dutch Reformed Church in the region, Mau-Mau Bett also taught Isabella and her siblings the Lord's Prayer in Dutch.[3] She also admonished them to obey their masters.

Thus, just as Elizabeth's mother instructed her to depend on God to protect her we see here how Isabella's mother transmitted survival strategies[4] to her children that she believed would help them to cope with their status as chattel slaves. These strategies were influenced by values based in the proslavery sentiments and controlling ideologies of the dual institutions of Anglo-Christianity and slavery as well as in African-derived notions of divinity. On the one hand, Mau-Mau Bett told her children to be obedient consistent with the Christian teachings that targeted subaltern social agents within the system of slavery. On the other hand, she conveyed to them that even though their slave master would attempt to silence them, physically punish, or otherwise abuse them they were not alone. Isabella's mother taught her and her siblings that they had access to a God who would be with them even in the midst of the inhumane conditions of slavery. God was ever present, could hear and see them, and would help them. The question is, however, did Mau-Mau Bett succumb to the misrecognition of these teachings as tools used to reproduce hierarchies of power within the structure of slavery or did she admonish her children to be obedient as a means of safeguarding their physical security? Isabella's mother certainly recognized the cruelty of the system. One could then argue that Mau-Mau Bett's own reliance upon and teaching regarding a God who sees black people in objective conditions of slavery means that she did recognize the abject reality of slavery as "unnatural." Therefore, perhaps her admonition of obedience, like her teachings about the presence of a God who sees and protects, is a strategy intended to better ensure her children's survival and the relative possibility of family cohesion.[5]

Isabella certainly experienced physical abuse at the hands of her slave masters. Under her owners the Nealys and later the Dumonts, there are also indications that Isabella may have, as

had other countless black women, suffered sexual violence and abuse. Her spiritual narrative speaks of a "long series of trials" that should be "passed over in silence" due to "motives of delicacy." While it has been assumed that Isabella and other black women have been sexually abused by male slave owners, historian Nell Irvin Painter states that mistresses of the household, in a small percentage of cases, might also have been sexual abusers of black women. Moreover, she contends that in the case of Isabella it was Sally Dumont and not John Dumont who sexually assaulted her. Painter cites Isabella's identification with John Dumont and her contempt for Sally Dumont as well as her use of the word "unnatural" for acts that Painter argues would have been openly cited in defense of abolition in nineteenth-century narratives if they had been perpetrated by a male. Painter also mentions that Isabella relates to Olive Gilbert in the late 1840s that "she did not want to distress the innocent who were still living." While John Dumont was still alive at that time, Sally Dumont had died three years earlier.[6]

Whether the perpetrator was Sally or John Dumont Isabella was treated as a transactional body, a commodity, as property to be used by white women and men who possessed privilege and power. Given these circumstances, a black woman speaking about intimate violence as a matter of public discourse would have felt compelled to tread lightly, not only because of the conservative social mores of the time, but also as a matter of self-protection and mental health. That contemporary "standards of decency" often dictated the rhetorical strategies employed by women writers is not lost on African American literary scholars, historians, and ethicists. For example, Toni Morrison observes that in slave narratives information about the interior lives of black female subjects is scant and most often inaccessible. African American female slave narratives and autobiographies were most often written to be "acceptable" to white audiences. Therefore, Morrison recognizes that their narratives "were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things."[7] Mores of acceptability and practices of silence and omission with respect to black female autobiographical literature were especially adhered to when it came to sexual violence and rape. Olive Gilbert merely hints at incidents of sexual violence in *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*

(incidentally by commenting that this was too private to divulge publicly). Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is one of the few autobiographical texts published in the 1800s that clearly exposes the vulnerability and sexual violence endured by black females. Given the perilous environments of black female life during the nineteenth century, at the very least threats or possibilities of sexual and physical violence and exploitation might have loomed large in black women's lives.[8] Rape, death, and sexual violence or the threat of such violence were used as weapons to control black women and girls living in the 1800s. The thoroughly calculated as well as the impulsive use of these weapons ensured that the fear of annihilation—physical, psychological, and spiritual—would likely be ever present in the black female mind. Moreover, the continual devaluation and degradation of black women, men, and children most certainly led to, on some level, an internalization of low self-worth and value, or even trauma.

As shown above, fear, anxiety, lack of self-worth, violence, and trauma have a fragmenting, disintegrative effect upon the human personality, upon the human soul. The fragmenting effects of violence and oppression can also give rise to a crisis of the self, rooted not only in a fear of possible spiritual annihilation but also in the potential for physical and/or psychological obliteration. Harriet Jacobs describes the system of domination that consumed her life as an overarching evil force.[9] This constant threat of violence in, and the unrelenting exertion of power over, the lives of black women and girls such as Isabella could certainly lead to fear of annihilation of the self in light of the trauma associated with exposure and vulnerability.

> Traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror.[10]

Free and enslaved black women and girls working in domestic spaces were at risk for sexual and physical violence and abuse. These women literally engaged in a life and death struggle against the threat of annihilation and fragmentation of the self on spiritual, physical, and psychological levels. Isabella remembered her mother's teachings as she endured the violence of the "peculiar

institution." Below, is an account of how she prayed to God to help her after Nealy maliciously beat her.

> One Sunday morning…she was told to go to the barn; on going there, she found her master with a bundle of rods, prepared in embers, and bound them together with cords. When he had tied her hands together before her, he gave her the most cruel whipping she was ever tortured with. He whipped her till the flesh was deeply lacerated, and the blood streamed from her wounds.…In these hours of her extremity, she did not forget the instructions of her mother, to go to God in all her trials…"and telling him all—and asking him if he thought it was right," and begging him to protect and shield her from her persecutors.[11]

The lash of the whip was meted out as one of the many tools of punishment and physical violence intended to control African American women, men, and children enslaved in North America. As Bourdieu has argued slavery is a prime example of a system of "direct domination." Physical violence is a tool used to produce and reproduce the hierarchy of relationships that constitute not only the system of slavery in antebellum North America but also the systems of patriarchy and Anglo supremacy that perpetuate such oppressive structures. Therefore, symbolic violence serves as the primary mechanism that perpetuates structures of domination.[12] It is meant to inculcate within an enslaved person a belief that the slave master possesses the power of life and death over the victim, that her body, her life belong to him. This depth of vulnerability must indeed have had a potentially disintegrative effect upon the human soul. Certainly, as we shall see below, the tools of control used by white slave masters had an extremely deleterious effect upon Isabella's personality-soul and how she perceived herself in relation to her masters. Still, Isabella continued to call upon the God of her memory, the God her mother had told her about, to raise critical questions regarding the justness of her plight.

Language, Image of God, and the Rhetoric of Oppression

While early in life Isabella adhered to her mother's teaching regarding prayer, she was also influenced by the teachings her mother instilled within her that echoed the rhetoric and demands of the

slave master: do not lie or steal and obey your master. Admonitions against lying were among the tools of symbolic violence used by the slave master. The moral demands made upon the enslaved were intended to protect the slave master's household and property while those who enslaved other human beings as chattel property failed to confront the moral contradictions that ownership entailed. At the same time, enslaved African Americans also had to make choices as social and moral agents. The conflicting messages and tensions that lie at the intersection of these matrices of power and the individual social agent reflect the conflicts and tensions that exist for anyone attempting to negotiate a life within the matrix of domination. Mau-Mau Bett gave her advice as a strategy for survival. She was well aware of the punishment that awaited enslaved African Americans who were caught lying or stealing or who disobeyed their masters. Mau-Mau Bett had seen her own children being sold away and had witnessed and no doubt experienced, first hand, physical violence and violation. She, as had many other enslaved blacks, lived daily with the fear and terror of being punished or watching a loved one suffering under the lash.

Here again, we see the role that fear and anxiety played for those suffering under the weight of oppression and the disintegrative effect fear can have upon the human personality. Isabella herself was deathly afraid of her master(s). She was so in awe of her master and so afraid of his wrath that she would deprive herself of sleep and work without resting in order to please him. She looked to her master to define her purpose and validate her actions. Internalizing the controlling ideologies of the matrix of domination, Isabella spoke of the institution of slavery as "right and honorable." If other enslaved blacks would speak contemptuously about slavery, she would report their statements to the master. Isabella's self-understanding, her decisions, actions, and her relationships with other slaves were greatly shaped by the controlling influence of her master and her fears of what her master would do to her if she did not conform to his expectations. She was consumed with pleasing and being validated by her white slave master.[13]

In Isabella, the system of slavery had presumably produced the quintessential slave. In many ways, she came to embody the social, economic, and political structures of the system. The physical and symbolic tools of violence used to subjugate and maintain power

and control over African American women, created in Isabella misrecognition of the objective conditions of slavery. Therefore, Isabella in many ways internalized an oppressive worldview, definitions, and values espoused by her oppressor as a matter of physical and psychological survival. Below, I discuss in more detail the controlling ideologies, definitions, and values that operate to support the dominating structures of institutional slavery.

The language of rhetoric and the power to define were employed along with systems of punishment and reward by white slave masters in order to condition enslaved African Americans to forget or discard liberative ways of knowing and to embrace white supremacist or patriarchal values as normative. Even when enslaved African Americans internally rejected these oppressive tactics, blacks often had to make compromises as a means of surviving within a slave culture. Religion was one of the tools used in an attempt to render those enslaved more docile and accepting of their status as chattel. White men who wanted to maintain the power to name and define within these dominating structures recreated the Christian God in their own image. This God was white and male and had ordained the subjugation of certain segments of humanity within a hierarchal set of social relationships. He was cruel and vengeful and would severely punish anyone who did not conform to the hierarchal structure he established.

Isabella's story provides an example of how the language of rhetoric, images of the divine, and the power to name and define, creates social roles and relationships that support structures of domination. She along with other African Americans, were meant to be conditioned by the rhetoric, images, and definitions used to perpetuate slavery as an institution. They were often coerced into complicity through complex systems of institutional violence and social reward (for cooperating) and punishment (for not cooperating). For example, a form of symbolic violence used by slave holders was to promote the language of "obedience" as a Christian virtue and the primary teaching and message conveyed in sermons and worship services organized or approved by white masters. These masters were not as concerned with the spiritual formation of enslaved African Americans or the state of their souls as they were with convincing slaves that God, *himself*,[14] demanded the sacrifice of their bodies in cooperation with the system of slavery.

This same God would reward them for their obedience and punish them for any disobedience. Once again, this amounts to yet another instance in which "coercion of desire" plays itself out in attempts to exploit, channel, and control the passions, wants, and skills of black people.

Moreover, the admonitions against lying or stealing were not as much about the desire to teach character and virtue to the worship attendees as they were about ensuring enslaved blacks would protect their master's property and wealth, even if it meant their own deprivation—deprivation of food and adequate shelter or clothing—or that their family members went without basic necessities. Isabella, herself, adopted the language and rhetoric of obedience and understood her own unwillingness to lie or steal even to feed her own children as a triumph over the institution of slavery and the predicament she found herself in as a black woman. She believed that in maintaining what she felt was her Christian virtue in the face of the oppressive conditions of bondage she had remained steadfast in her faith and had not allowed the evil that pervaded the system of slavery to devour her as well. The question is, was this adoption of selective virtues established by the slave master by enslaved women such as Isabella first and foremost a moral act of courage or did these women adopt the language as a survival strategy—either as a means of avoiding punishment or as an attempt to exert some control within an abusive, exploitive relationship?

As a result of being conditioned within the institution of slavery, Isabella capitulated to the slave master, according to Gilbert, as if he were God. Isabella's divinization of the slave master may not have been unique. Itinerant preacher John Jea describes this as a more widespread phenomenon among enslaved blacks who suffered and witnessed the brutalization of black bodies.

> After our master had been treating us in this cruel manner, we were obliged to thank him for the punishment. . . . We were often led away with the idea that our masters were our gods.[15]

For Isabella, the God her mother had taught her about took on the face and attributes of her slave master. She believed that her

master could see her wherever she was and always knew exactly what she was doing. This belief caused her to feel so guilty that she would implicate not only herself, but also others in wrongdoing thinking that her confessions might lessen her punishment for disobedience. Isabella was so identified with her master that she was willing to risk her health and the exposure of other enslaved African Americans. As a god her master demanded her unquestioning obedience and wielded his power by the use of threats and violence. He held the power of life and death in his hands, or so she believed. Isabella regarded this slave master/god with fear and trembling and, seized by anxiety, worked day and night to do the things that she thought would please him. In her fear and desire to please, Isabella separated herself from other blacks and identified more with her master/god than those who shared her own circumstances.

Thus, we see how Isabella is vexed by servile fear, overwhelming anxiety, and undermining pangs of guilt. Her memory is fractured and she has become attached to a view of the world constructed by the white slave master who sought to control her life, exploit her body, and suppress any attempts on the behalf of Isabella and other enslaved blacks to assert an authentic sense of self. The slave traders and masters were colonizers—colonizers of land, bodies, and souls—who would continue to use all legal, social, and religious tools and avenues available to them to maintain power and privilege. Next, I will discuss colonization as a theological concept and the relationship between what Beverly Lanzetta refers to as *via feminina* or the practice of unsaying and decolonization of the mind.

Breaking the Bonds of Slavery: Misrecognition and the Decolonization of the Mind

Womanist, feminist, and liberation theologians have employed the notion of "colonization" as a theologizing concept and category to explicate socially constructed relationships and ideologies of domination and subordination within a worldwide context of colonialism, postcolonialism, and patriarchy.[16] Theological discourse using "colonization" as a meaning-making category takes as its point of departure the European invasion of Africa and the

Americas and the concomitant acts of violence, genocide, the rape of indigenous women, and the destruction of land and sacred sites.[17] Rape, violence, and destruction were colonial tools that served to subjugate indigenous people and indigenous knowledge, language, and cultural forms in order to supplant the colonized people's ways of doing and being with the language, religion, and culture, of the colonizers. The purpose of this process of subjugation and supplantation was to control and exploit the people, land, and resources for the benefit of the colonizers. The colonizer became the center, the norm for legitimized behavior, thought, and values. The cultural norms, values, and philosophies of the colonized were deemed backward, dangerous, and evil.

As noted in chapter 1, Delores Williams coined the phrase "colonization of female mind and culture" as a category for theological discourse in her book *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*.

> [The] colonization of female mind and culture means that male culture—emphasizing, mystifying, sacralizing and perpetuating the male figure and male thought—long ago invaded and subjugated the female figure and the continuity of female thought processes and accomplishments so that women's culture could neither take holistic form nor be visible and perpetuated. Thus female thought and culture were "converted to the culture of the [male] colonists," and the cultural symbols of the male colonists imperialistically controlled the thought and behavior of women.[18]

According to Williams, then, women, colonized by male culture, see themselves through the eyes of the male colonizer. They internalize male-centered stereotypes and images that objectify and distort women's roles and identities in history and culture. As a result, women's histories, stories, language, symbols, rituals, and God-talk are subordinated, co-opted, or rendered invisible in ways that serve the colonizer and fuel the misrecognition of power dynamics operating within the social context. To place Williams's notion of the colonization of the female mind and female culture within the framework of Bourdieu's dominating structures provides a lens through which we can analyze how social inputs influence the identities of enslaved females. In systems shaped by

hierarchy and dominating structures punishment, violence, deprivation, and death are used as tools to exploit, manipulate, and control black women. These tools are used as a means to subordinate, co-opt, and render invisible African American women's histories, stories, rituals, and God-talk. As discussed in chapter 1, Collins also argues that systems of domination not only employ penalties but also provide rewards and privileges to control subordinates and to mystify and subjugate knowledge and perspectives that run counter to the dominant agent or colonizer's perspectives.[19] The matrix of domination is so virulent and even insidious in its approach that subordinates or the colonized lose, reject, or forget indigenous ways of knowing and assimilate to the colonizer's viewpoint.

Isabella represents a prime example of how the forms of direct physical and symbolic violence employed within the institution of slavery worked to colonize female minds and culture and subjugate black female knowledge. Isabella's mother passed on to her children symbols, rituals, and God-talk that would assist and sustain them on their journey. Perhaps, however, the system of slavery had so conditioned Isabella that this knowledge was, at least for a time, suppressed. The memory of her mother's teaching was submerged beneath the internalized belief that slavery was morally right and slaves were inferior to their masters. Isabella's mind was so completely colonized that she saw her white male master as an all-seeing, all-knowing god. She looked to him for validation. She sought his "praise," even though his so-called compliments were demeaning, racist, and sexist. Below, is an account of how Isabella's master's "praise" motivated her to work even harder to please him.

> [Isabella] became more ambitious than ever to please him; and he stimulated her ambition by his commendation, and by boasting of her to his friends, telling them "*that* wench" (pointing to Isabel) "is better to me than a *man*—for she will do a good family's washing in the night, and be ready in the morning to go into the field, where she will do as much at raking and binding as my best field hands."…These extra exertions to please, and the praises consequent upon them, brought upon her head the envy of her fellow-slaves, and they taunted her with being the "*white folks' nigger.*"[20]

Whether or not other enslaved blacks labeled Isabella as the "white folks' nigger" because of envy, the label itself speaks to the extent to which Isabella's identification with her master had subsumed her own personality and alienated her from her community. It was the slave master who defined her purpose, which was to serve him and the institution of slavery. Isabella adapted her thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors to conform to the will of her all-powerful master—a white, male god who held the power of life and death over her and her children. Seized by fear of punishment, she implicated herself and other blacks in wrongdoing, exposing others to the threat of punishment, and hoping that either she would be rewarded or the severity of her punishment would be mitigated by her confessions.

Isabella, however, again began to experience tension with the oppressive conditions of slavery. This tension was between the objective conditions of abuse and violence she and other African Americans faced at the hands of slave owners and their surrogates and the sensibilities instilled within her as a child that abuse and violence against black bodies is unjust. As she continued to witness the suffering and abuse of other enslaved blacks, Isabella also began to raise questions in response to her own internal conflict. Despite the fact that she was held in bondage by slavery, Isabella discovered that her mind did not have to be held captive by the slave master. Collins contends that whatever one's sociohistorical condition, the consciousness remains a "sphere of freedom" in which self-definition takes shape and knowledge is sustained and developed.[21] It was in her recovery of African American female ways of knowing, rituals, and the God-talk of her African-derived habitus that Isabella's consciousness began to take shape and to grow independently of the master-colonizer's gaze. It was through this recovery as well as her practice of these ways of thinking, being, and doing that she is provided the remedies needed to address her own suffering and revolt against oppression.

In order to make sense out of the growing inner conflict she felt regarding the institution of slavery, Isabella drew once again upon the prayer tradition and the God about whom her mother had taught her and her other siblings. This was the One who would always hear her pleas and would help her. It is during this spiritual and psychological crisis that Isabella recalls the memories of her

mother's teachings and goes back to her earlier spiritual practices to find resolution. These practices assisted her in times of need. She withdraws from the watchful eye of her master and mistress to commune with God in her "rural sanctuary." African American women such as Isabella prayed to and communed with the divine in natural surroundings away from the watchful eye of the slave master and his surrogates. For example, Elizabeth retreated to "every lonely place" she could "find an altar." These altars were located at the edges of open fields and underneath fences.[22] The ex-slave Mary also describes how she offered daily prayers—in a thicket that was located at a distance from the house.[23] Below, is a description of Isabella's own praying ground and her spiritual practices in prayer.

> The place she selected, in which to offer up her daily orisons, was a small island in a small stream covered with large willow shrubbery.…It was a lonely spot, and chosen by her for its beauty, its retirement, and because she thought that there, in the noise of those waters, she could speak louder to God, without being overheard by any who might pass that way. When she had made her choice of her sanctum, at a point of the island where the stream met, after being separated, she improved it by pulling away the branches of the shrubs form the centre, and weaving them together for a wall on the outside, forming a circular arched alcove, made entirely of the graceful willow. To this place she resorted daily, and in pressing times much more frequently.[24]

In West African mysticism water is associated with "spiritual energy." Therefore, Finnian Nwaozor states that "as a vital element in life, flowing water is deeply revered, it is invested with divine and spiritual essence." He goes on to say that "nature provides [human beings] with vital sustenance and security from harmful mystical forces."[25] Charles Long states that slaves, "through the transformation of nature" created "an objective reality that confirm[ed] and shape[d] their own consciousness of self independent of the master's definition."[26] Isabella constructs sacred space that creates conditions in which nature could mediate the spiritual forces and divine power inhabiting her sacred-social world. These forces or energies might include deities and ancestors. The walls of branches and shrubbery provide safety,

beauty, and shelter. Through Isabella's prayers and invocations, this natural altar is transformed into emancipatory mystical space that serves as a site for vital union and intersubjectivity. The act of constructing this space itself serves as an act of devotion and intentionality in response to the objective conditions of violence and abuse.[27]

Once again, we see the importance of African American women engaging in acts of critical distancing by withdrawing from spaces that serve to confine, marginalize, and suppress the black female personality-soul. Isabella's daily spiritual exercise in prayer is an exercise in freedom. She draws upon the same memories evidenced by the slave narratives of Mary and other women who made connections between nature and mystical consciousness. Here, under the vast, open sky, Isabella talks with God, not the god of the white slave master, but the God about whom her mother had taught her as she and her siblings sat around listening intently to Mau-Mau Bett and asking questions as they communed together under the heavens. Here, within the willow walls she had crafted out of nature's resources, Isabella experiences freedom and contemplates the expansiveness of the One who created the heavens and the earth. The act of constructing this sanctuary, serves as an act of prayer, of contemplation in and of itself reflecting the love, concern, and beauty resident within human-divine interaction. Unlike the constricted space of the master-approved worship services in which slaves were constantly pummeled with the rhetoric of obedience and Christian virtue as a means of protecting and supporting the master's accumulated wealth, Isabella's sanctuary recalls the brush arbor meetings and praying grounds of enslaved blacks who escaped the watchful eye of the master to commune with *their* God, not the god of the slave master. Isabella's praying ground set within a group of shrubs by the water served as an emancipatory setting in which she could encounter divinity. It is here in this rural sanctuary that Isabella engages regularly, in a practice of prayer and contemplation that enables her to find an answer to the question regarding whether or not slavery is right. Within the mystical space of this sanctuary Isabella does not serve as a commodified transactional body; she acts as a whole person, an animated body, an embodied soul seeking knowledge in a space not immediately controlled

by the slave master. Isabella's talks with God at nature's altar prepare the ground for the expansion of her understanding of the divine and of herself that transcends the oppressive notions of God perpetuated by the slaveholding culture.

Isabella resolves her questions regarding the "rightness" of slavery through her daily practices of prayer and contemplation. As Isabella prays and communes with her God, she petitions God to address her suffering. Through prayer she receives an answer. She revolts against the oppressive and unjust system of slavery by running away. This act of defiance and independence is divinely authorized and sanctioned on the "praying ground," for Isabella believes it is God who, in response to her petitions, directs her to run away and that it is God who gives her a plan to escape. In this way, God affirms her humanity and declares the system of slavery unjust.

Within the mystical space of her "rural sanctuary,"[28] Isabella engages in the apophatic way of what Beverly Lanzetta reimagines as *via feminina*. In the language of traditional Western Christian mysticism, *apophasis* refers to negative language about the divine in which "all statements must be unsaid in deference to God's hidden reality."[29] It entails embarking on a journey to "leave behind" stagnant notions of the divine. Only in the silence can the seeker come to know an unknown deity.[30] Negation is an act of self-emptying that reconfigures and clarifies the devotee's consciousness and transforms an individual's "core identity."[31] Lanzetta introduces the term *via feminina* as a way of discussing an approach to mysticism that captures women's transformative processes, processes that affirm an embodied consciousness in which women come to recognize the social, religious, and racial structures and attitudes that have helped to establish and perpetuate forms of abuse and violence. Therefore,

> The spiritual path of *via feminina*… places primary importance on the recognition and elimination of all interlocking forms of oppression in a person's journey toward God and self-understanding. Women's spiritual liberation involves an awareness of the simultaneous, interpenetrating, and dynamic interrelationship between embodiment and transcendence—finite and infinite—that constitutes the whole complex of the person.[32]

Lanzetta's "spiritual path of *via feminina*" or the process of unsaying is applicable to nineteenth-century African American women's mystical encounters. For it is within the context of these mystical spaces and ritual processes of separation and liminality, that women such as Isabella deconstruct white supremacist and patriarchal notions of God.

"Oh God, I Did Not Know You Were So Big": Black Women's Mysticism and the Emancipation of God-Talk

As we saw above, it is through spiritual exercises or practices passed onto her by her mother that Isabella reclaims an image of God that stood counter to her image of a white male god who demanded blind obedience and a subjugation of the black female self. The image of God Isabella inherited from her mother was concerned about her plight. Isabella could talk to this God—this God who not only has the capacity to hear, but also to comprehend. Out of divine compassion this God would respond to her prayers and provide her with the help and support she needed in times of trouble. She withdraws daily to her sanctuary and talks with God about the troubles and suffering she endures as a slave. In these talks with God, Isabella is elevated to a partner, a participant-witness in a divine dialogue. This status is markedly different from the one she held vis-à-vis her master. As a god, her master is unapproachable, punishing, and suppressive. However, the God she meets daily in the woods by the stream is accessible, compassionate, and affirming. This deity is similar to the understanding of the Supreme Deity grounded in John Jea's West African habitus. Originally from Calabar, West Africa (present day Nigeria), Jea's family was steeped in Efik cosmology in which the Supreme Being is *Abasi* a God "who dwells in the sky, created the world and discountenances all injustice and evil."[33]

Isabella's understanding of God continues to adapt and expand. It is during Pinkster, a Dutch festival or Whitsuntide in the English counterpart of Wesleyan Methodism, that Isabella faces a life-crisis when she learns that Dumont, her former master, intends to come and take her back with him. The Pinkster festival which takes place during Pentecost marks the ritual space in which

Isabella confronts this crisis. Graham Russell Hodges states that "Pinkster created a temporary equality and community among Africans and the Dutch."[34] This equality, however, was based on Dutch slave owners not having to emancipate slaves according to rules of Anglican baptism. Therefore, the festival also served as a "safety valve."[35] For the enslaved Africans, holding onto memories of African celebrations the festival may have been associated with West African initiation or rites of passage ceremonies. In the week before the festival begins Africans in Albany, New York, would:

> patrol the streets in the evening more than usual, and begin to practice a little upon the Guinea drum. The slaves also set up an encampment on Pinkster Hill [later Capitol Hill]…[where] Toto, or the Guinea dance [is performed] by males and females.…After Pinkster…blacks and whites [awaited] the appearance of King Charles…an old Guinea Negro…[who was] the principle character in the festival.[36]

Nell Irvin Painter writes that by the early nineteenth century the Pinkster observance had become a carnival-like jubilee celebration in which Africans gave instruction to those "American born."[37] Mikhail Bahktin theorizes that carnival celebrations serve as a contrast to ecclesial ceremonies that represent institutional hierarchical order. Carnival symbolizes the inversion of societal norms and hierarchy. For Bahktin, ecclesial organizations represent institutions characterized by inequalities.[38] Whereas, as Hodges states with respect to Pinkster, carnival celebrations represent equality and the transformation of social relationships. In carnival festivities, normative power relationships and hierarchical privilege are not only suspended, but parodied. While ecclesiastical ceremonies often are rooted in the desire to "justify" societal and institutional norms, the symbolism of carnival is associated with the death of prevailing norms, revitalization, and new beginnings. "Carnivalization" refers to the ways humor and parody can subvert dominant power relationships, inject alternative perspectives into public discourse, and potentially emancipate subordinate members of society.[39] For Isabella, a Dutch African American Methodist, the Pinkster celebration represents a spiritual and cultural conflict. According to Painter, by this time Isabella was practicing within the holiness tradition of

"New York Methodism."[40] Her understanding of religious piety was now informed by evangelical ideas of sin consciousness. She had given up her love of drink (although it would take longer for her to give up tobacco) for a life of perfection and holiness. Isabella is seeking sanctification. As an African celebration with drumming, dancing, food, and drink, Pinkster is portrayed as a symbol of so-called vice, temptation, and sin. Even though she is no longer fully bound by the misrecognition of slavery as a right institution, Isabella still views the African festival with ambivalence—as a temptation to "backslide" into sin and evil.

> Isabella "looked back into Egypt" and imagined the good times to come with Pinkster among her black friends back at the Dumonts'. Pinkster in 1827 bore a bundle of meanings for Isabella: slavery and blackness, freedom and apprehension, hope and vice and pleasure, and commitment to a life of religious purity—the old world and the new order all at once.[41]

The practice of associating that which is black and African with evil is also espoused by John Jea in his spiritual narrative where he indicates that African and African-derived beliefs and practices were examples of "superstition" and "idolatry."[42] While Jea is also critical of the institution of slavery and slaveholders who act in ways he understood as contradictory to Christian ethical demands, he reinforces the rhetoric of cultural debasement in his autobiographical rendering of his conversion. Graham Hodges argues, however, even given Jea's position of cultural debasement his understanding of Christianity and the Christian God is informed by Efik cosmology. One wonders again how much African American Christian converts are actually deceived by the misrecognition of the rhetoric of cultural debasement and how many use the literary conventions available to them as a way of gaining and exercising spiritual capital within the North American Protestant religious field and inclusion within established religious communities.

Thus, in Truth's narrative does this sentiment of associating that which is African with "idolatry" and "superstition" indicate the use of a survival strategy, or is it more suggestive of Gilbert's interpretive lens? Or is Isabella, like Jea, and Jarena Lee struggling to understand what she is to *do* to resolve a life-crisis?

While Painter states that for a Methodist within the holiness tradition Pinkster would have been associated with "a good time" and would have been anathema to someone seeking the holy life, Hodges reminds us that Pinkster represents the season of Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit. As Painter acknowledges Isabella is fundamentally "pentecostal."[43] Thus, we see that Isabella establishes herself within the Methodist holiness tradition. Yet, at the same time, she continues to remember and long for Afro-Dutch ritual traditions. Perhaps Isabella is really much more focused on identifying and adhering to a structured process that leads to spiritual empowerment and personal cohesion. I would argue that even though persons such as John Jea and Isabella rhetorically reject these African-based practices their worldview is still informed by these structures as a part of their African or African American habitus.

Notwithstanding the rhetoric of cultural debasement found in Jea and Isabella's accounts, these structured processes are processes consistent with African American cultural and religious dispositions. I would argue that despite the negative connotations associated with the Pinkster celebration it may have been the rhythms and energy of the drums and dancing black bodies that contributed to establishing a container for emancipatory mystical space. Particularly since, as Painter suggests, this event occurs in 1827 when Pinkster is celebrated just one month before emancipation in New York State. Versions of what happened during this celebration differ between Dumont's daughter Gertrude and Isabella.[44] Gertrude claims that her father never visited Isabella on that day. Yet within the social and literary space of her narrative, Isabella sets the stage in her version with a prophetic announcement that Dumont would in fact be coming to take her back. In her version, Dumont's intentions and her longing to celebrate Pinkster with other African Americans represent her objectionable desire to "look back into Egypt."[45] Utilizing the rhetoric of cultural debasement and the appropriate language of the Christian evangelical conversion-sanctification narrative Isabella establishes the parameters of her sanctification. What I would argue, however, is that although she uses the language of cultural debasement, Isabella's sanctification and, ultimately, her separation from the slave consciousness of the institution of

slavery was rooted in the emancipatory structure of the carnival or African festival tradition. The mystical space of Isabella's narrative becomes the liminal space in which her consciousness dips into the African-derived sacred-social network and her mind is liberated. Perhaps the memories evoked by this celebration enable her to act as participant-witness in the vision of a primordial time and space where punishing slave masters and chattel slavery do not exist, a liminal space in which one has access to a God who hears and sees. Emancipatory mystical space for nineteenth-century black women is not just a space of encounter, but also of access. Perhaps in spite of the demonization of African practices it is here that Isabella catches a glimpse of the vision that the ritual historically evokes—the "natural" impulse to survive, to thrive, and to seek connection to a larger community rather than to capitulate or succumb to evil. Isabella participates fully within the holiness tradition of the Methodist Church, however, she still likes tobacco and longs to participate in the communal festival of Pinkster. Isabella demonstrates that vital cohesion for her involves a complex personality and the use of complex practices that support an emancipated life. An emancipation that is physical, spiritual, intellectual, and social.

In any event, we see the profound effect of Isabella's transformation begins to take place during the Festival of Pinkster or Whitsuntide. She is living with the Van Wagener family (for whom she had gone to work after she ran away from Dumont). In Isabella's version of the story, Dumont appears at the Van Wagener's place to take her back with him. Just as Isabella had resigned to return with Dumont, the expansive nature of God is revealed to her in a mystical encounter.

> With all the suddenness of a flash of lightning showing her, "in the twinkling of an eye, that he was *all over*"—that he pervaded the universe—"and that there was no place where God was not." [When]…her attention was once more called to outward things, she observed her master had left, and exclaiming aloud, "Oh God, I did not know you were so big."[46]

Once again, the imagery of lightening is used to describe the instantaneous feeling of illumination experienced in the mystical encounters of black women. Isabella's mystical revelation

expanded her understanding of a God who exists not only in the sky—above and beyond the human condition but who is also immanently present in the material world. The power of this revelation compels Isabella to be attentive to her own interiority, to the discovery of her own identity, as she rejects the culture's view of her as merely an objectified source of labor, a transactional body. Instead, she views herself as a human Subject and, as such, she engages in theological reflection and contemplation critical to her own spiritual, psychological, and intellectual freedom and development.[47]

As we have seen in previous chapters, divine love and assurance are important aspects of Christian mystical experience and transformation. Isabella experiences empowerment and catharsis as she prays. A profound sense of love comes over her. She sees Jesus in a vision and, consequently, Isabella is convinced that she has found a divine friend. She is assured of God's love and acceptance.

> "Who *are* you?" she exclaimed, as the vision brightened into a form distinct, beaming with the beauty of holiness, and radiant with love. She then said, audibly addressing the mysterious visitant—"I *know* you, and I *don't* know you." Meaning, "You seem perfectly familiar; I feel that you not only love me, but that you always *have* loved me—yet I know you not—I cannot call you by name"… "Who are you?" was the cry of her heart, and her whole soul was in one deep prayer that this heavenly personage might be revealed to her, and remain with her. At length, after bending both soul and body with the intensity of this desire, till breath and strength seemed failing, and she could maintain her position no longer, an answer came to her, saying distinctly, "It is Jesus."[48]

Isabella dares to ask the question as Subject "Who are you?" Her soul is overcome by the beauty, compassion, and healing power of the One who is revealed to her. "It is Jesus." Isabella experiences the ritual process of vitality-empowerment-catharsis. She is finally liberated from the power of the master. Pinkster marks the mystical space in which Isabella encounters Jesus the mediator as Friend. The image of Jesus as Friend suggests Jesus's conversation with the disciples in John 15:15. In that text, Jesus subverts the master/servant relationship and identifies the disciples no longer as "servants" but as "friends." Embracing Jesus as "Friend," Isabella

has rejected the master-slave dichotomy. When her mind is decolonized she is no longer an enslaved body compelled to be obedient to a master, struggling to ensure her own individual survival. She is a companion of the divine working to bring about God's vision in the world.

Through her visionary experience during the Pinkster festival, Isabella's "God-talk" is emancipated. Her image of God as a white male master was already shattered by the realization that the God her mother had taught her about could not be identified with such limited images of misrecognition. Isabella adds to her childhood understanding as relayed by her mother. She now not only embraces a God who is a helper and a friend but a God who is also "all over." Isabella's understanding of God reflects her expanding notion of her own sociohistorical reality. As her vision of self and material reality expands, so does her image of God. Isabella's God is now consistent with the God of West African tradition that is understood to be both transcendent and immanent. This God occupies the totality of all that is and is near enough to see her and help her when she is in trouble. God as transcendent-immanent is an important concept for people who are radically marginalized. For this God is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. For Isabella, an enslaved woman, it is crucial to know that God serves as a divine witness to her suffering and oppression (and also sees the injustice done by the oppressor) but also has the power to deliver her. Furthermore, she has access to that same power whenever she is in need. Isabella's visionary experience also enables her to understand herself in a relationship with God that is characterized by love and mutuality rather than fear and violence. God is a protector, a provider, and Jesus is not her master but her friend. Jesus is the approachable immanent aspect of the divine who walks with her and identifies with her as a companion on the journey. In her fellowship with Jesus, she experiences an inclusive relationality with the Holy and access to divine knowledge that can provide her with the clarity of vision and the resources she needs to fulfill her calling. Her sacred-social world is expanded to include the ancestral presence and teachings of her mother and an expansive nonhierarchical understanding of deity and Jesus as co-traveler.

Living in New York City, Isabella becomes increasingly aware of the prevalent social and economic inequalities. This awareness and her growing tensions with this state of social injustice would trigger for her an important processual movement toward reaggregation. On June 1, 1843, on the day of Pentecost Isabella declares that she will no longer use her slave name, but that she would be called by her new name: Sojourner Truth. For she believes God has renamed her and has authorized her to travel around preaching and speaking the "truth."[49] "Following divine direction" Isabella leaves the city and travels east.[50] Naming in Yoruba culture and religion is a significant ritual event. Not only are children given names at their birth that convey the personality of the child and the expectations of her family regarding her contributions to the community, but children also receive ritual names during initiation rites that speak to their vocations as devotees of the Orisha. Naming and choosing to receive a name are powerful symbolic acts that assert a person's self-understanding into the world and govern their actions as the person takes on the essence of what her or his name conveys. Sojourner's taking of her new name at a moment of rebirth is an act of agency in which she asserts herself as Subject, rejects her status as subjugated slave, and affirms the woman whom God has called her to be. The woman formerly named Isabella, who once thought that her master was God and slavery was "right and honorable," distances herself from agents of dominating institutions and structures and, as "Sojourner Truth", is transformed into a new self—a radical Subject who claims the authority to define who she is and her place in the world.[51]

5

Look at What You Have Done: Sacred Power and Reimagining the Divine

Rebecca Cox Jackson, a younger contemporary of Jarena Lee, was born in 1795 near Philadelphia. Initially, she was affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Her older brother Joseph Cox was a local preacher and held several offices for the AME denomination including that of elder. Joseph, along with Rebecca's husband Samuel Jackson who was also AME, figures prominently in her journal writings. Jackson's diary entries are edited by Jean McMahon Humez and published as *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*. In these entries, Jackson relates experiences and encounters that point to a dispositional propensity toward religious concepts and elements that in some ways parallel aspects of a West African ethos or common orientation cited in the works of Martin and Hayes. The first indication of this phenomenon occurs in Jackson's description of her religious conversion that takes place in 1830 when Jackson is 35 years old. Similar to other Protestant Christian conversion narratives Jackson experiences a spiritual awakening of the soul that is initiated by an acute emotional and spiritual crisis. This crisis erupts when Jackson is confronted by one of her deepest fears—her fear of lightning. When a lightning storm would strike she would take to her bed ill. On this particular occasion, Jackson prays mightily to alleviate the attack. In her journal she describes what happens next.

> And in this moment of despair the cloud bursted, the heavens was clear, and the mountain was gone.... And I rose from my knees, ran down stairs, opened the door to let the lightning in the house.[1]

J.R. Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism*

Wallowing in despair, Jackson calls out to God for help. The references to "light," "lighting," being filled with love, and "sheets of glory" signal the appearance of mystical space. Within this mystical space, Jackson experiences intimacy with the divine and is overcome with feelings of peace and protection. In this moment of divine presence Jackson experiences an expansion of the soul, that is, a lightness of her spirit. She is infused with feelings of peace, love, and joy. The obstacles and burdens that previously seemed to stand in her way vanish. Whereas lightening had been a constant source of anxiety for Jackson, she now welcomes the lightning into her home as a revelation of divine glory. In fact, she writes, "at every clap of thunder I leaped from the floor praising the God of my salvation."[2] As she welcomes in the lightning her home becomes a domestic altar of divine visitation, an emancipatory mystical space. This ecstatic encounter consoles and frees her soul. The love and joy she feels wells up into a yearning that everyone in the world could experience that same love.[3] This expansion of the soul motivates her to feel an increased sense of compassion for others in need of God's grace—particularly those whom Jackson believes have injured or wronged her. Jackson prays and asks God for a "strong mind" or religious determination.[4] With this newly found certitude she is empowered to live and work in a manner consistent with divine will. With a more profound respect for, and awe of, God, she experiences a deep sense of serenity. She now possesses a single-minded determination to serve God and serve God only.

Katherine Clay Bassard also suggests a connection between Jackson's conversion account and religious experience in Yoruba traditions. She sees parallels between Jackson's visionary conversion and myths describing the characteristics and power of Shango, the Yoruba deity of thunder. In her book *Spiritual Interrogations*, Bassard quotes Robert Farris Thompson's account of the Shango myth. Thompson explains how Shango was punished for irresponsibly "experimenting" with a leaf that manifested lightning. As a result of his experimentation the Oyo palace caught fire and Shango's child and wife died in the flames. Tormented by guilt, Shango hanged himself. In death, Thomspon writes that Shango "*became lightning itself. He became an eternal moral presence*, rumbling in the clouds, outraged by impure human acts."[5] Thompson refers to the story of Shango becoming lightning as "a tale of transformation

of lightning into moral action."[6] Bassard argues that the mythical Shango experiences conversion on a number of levels and that in the myth lightning is transformed from an "agent of destruction to a sign of moral retribution." She contends that Jackson's "conversion-possession scene"[7] speaks to her metaphorical death and being reborn as lightning as she takes on its qualities and characteristics in her bodily movements, gifts of power, and her role in the community.[8] Jackson's conversion story is certainly atypical. She does not primarily rely upon the language of sin consciousness as a way of initiating the conversion ritual. Instead, she exercises agency by engaging in ritual action—throwing open all of the windows and letting in the lightning integrating the characteristics of the lightning and thunder within her own being. Consequently, in her spiritual rebirth Jackson is endowed with spiritual gifts that demonstrate her ability to access sacred power in ways that subvert institutionally sanctioned forms of authority.

Issues of power and authority loom quite large for black women who are most often marginalized from the centers of power recognized by cultural and social institutions. However, African American women transformed from objects to Subjects through their mystical experiences have been able to establish a sense of inner authority that extends to their active lives. Rebecca Cox Jackson understood her authority to be rooted in the "gifts of power" she received from God. These gifts included healing, foreknowledge, and the gift of literacy.

Jackson believed that God had bestowed these gifts upon her so that she could minister to the needs of others. Jackson also experienced many dreams and visions during this period of awakening. These dreams and visions provided her with special knowledge and authority. She declared that "there was no mortal that I could go to and gain Instruction, so it pleased God…to teach me in dreams and visions and revelations and gifts."[9] Inspired by this authorization and empowerment Jackson uses her gifts to confront not only the structural constraints of the wider culture but also the patriarchal barriers presented by her family and the black church.

In one journal entry, Jackson writes about how she receives a gift of power in the spring of 1832 while she is married to Samuel. She is asked by another parishioner to go to a Sunday prayer meeting. Jackson had resolved that she would only go if Samuel would go.

On the Sunday morning of the meeting it was cloudy and Samuel told her that she could not go to the meeting because of the rain. She did not respond at first but when he approached her again to find out if she was going she agreed that she would not. At that moment she hears a voice saying to her, "Whom do you serve, God or man?"[10] Jackson becomes troubled and withdraws to an upstairs location to pray. During her prayer she hears the words, "Ask what you will. It shall be given."[11] Jackson asks for God to stop the rain so that she can travel to the prayer meeting. She persists in prayer until the rain stops. Jackson writes,

> I went to my place of prayer feeling blessed, [I] came down, went to the back door, looked up to the heaven. And while I was beholding the clouds, these words were spoken, "Do you know what you have done? You have climbed to the heaven and have taken hold of the clouds."[12]

Jackson's testimony about how, in a response to her prayer, God stops the rain is suggestive of sacred power as the Yoruba concept of ashe. Spirits within the sacred-social network of the Yoruba cosmos embody and serve as messengers of ashe or the power to make things happen. Moral women and men have access to this power. In exercising control over the wind and clouds Jackson also models the power of Oya goddess of the wind and tempest. Thompson contends that the power of Oya along with that of other "riverain goddesses" "militates against not only total male dominance" but also rigid class structures and socioeconomic inequalities.[13] The riverain Orisha represent female extra-institutional power that subverts male dominated power structures and works to protect the vulnerable and the marginalized. In Jackson's relationship to the thunder and lightning she embodies characteristics similar to the male and female characteristics of Yoruba divinity.

There are many instances in which we see Jackson demonstrating these characteristics. For example, we know that Jackson at times views God's power working by way of moral retribution. In her journal she writes about a dream she has concerning a Methodist preacher who was persecuting her. Jackson feels that the minister is attempting to undermine her spiritual authority. In her dream, however, Jackson is assured that her life is hidden

in Christ. God speaks to her and informs her that the minister would never bother her again. According to Jackson, the man packed a trunk the night before he was to travel from Albany back to Philadelphia and in the morning he was found dead. She is convinced that this man had received recompense for the seeds he had sown in life. Jackson's interpretation is certainly drawn from Christian notions and rhetoric regarding the retributive nature of divine action against those who persecute good and moral Christians. At the same time, Jackson claims access to special knowledge of this man's fate. Her special powers are especially solidified when the minister receives moral retribution. This case of moral retribution is indicative of Shango and the power of riverain deities such as Oya who are described by Thompson as "supreme in the arts of mystic retribution and protection against all evil."[14]

While Jackson is spiritually empowered by these experiences of encounter and her access to divine power, she does, at one point express great consternation regarding the implications of her gift. On the day that she prays to God to stop the rain and is told that she has indeed "taken hold of the clouds," she conveys her own inner conflicts regarding the suggestion that she herself has exercised agency in such an efficacious manner. Jackson writes,

> I was frightened. My knees gave way. I returned to my place. I knowed not how to lift up my heart in prayer for so great a sin. It appeared to me to be heaven-daring wickedness. After I had endured as much suffering as I could, I then wanted to pray to Almighty God to forgive me.[15]

Women such as Jackson have been conditioned to believe that these very gifts and consolations may lead to pride and arrogance. Jackson's assumption that the exercise of the power to control the environment is a sin, a wicked usurpation of power on her part is indicative of how women were conditioned to fear certain exercises of spiritual power. This conditioning is rooted in the Western bifurcation of orthodox religious beliefs and so-called pagan practices into separate and distinct categories of religion and magic. Superstition and paganism were associated with "magic" whereas Christian orthodoxy was considered "true" or "legitimate" religion. This bifurcation was sparked by struggles of authority and

power, the rise of modernity, and the eventual "desacralization of nature" and the "spiritualization of religion."[16]

In his book *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World*, Randall Styers explains how this bifurcation led to persecutions and witch trials. During much of the medieval period of Christian history institutional authorities, both religious and secular, did not pay much attention the ongoing local pagan practices in which congregants engaged. While "superstition," sorcery, and magic were frowned upon by theologians and clerics, pagan practices were considered "benign." During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, however, Christian thinkers increasingly associated pagan practices and magic with the demonic. With the rise of demonology as an ideological interpretation of pagan practices and the challenges paganism represented to Christian orthodoxy, magic and superstition (as associated with pagan practices) became identified with heresy[17] (although the magical practices of "the educated class" continued to be "broadly tolerated").[18] Now that paganism was associated with magic and magic with heresy and the demonic, institutional procedures were established to prosecute nonconformists accused of witchcraft. Women were particularly targeted by the waves of persecution as it was believed that women were morally weak, susceptible to temptation and, therefore, more likely to succumb to the wiles of the devil.

With the rise of Protestant denominations came also the claim that Catholic rituals were too entangled with magical practices. Here is where Styers argues the "link" between materiality and divinity is ruptured. While Protestants were critical of Catholic rituals and their perceived relationship to magical practices, Protestants along with Catholics participated in the persecution of so-called witches and co-contributed to the project of desacralizing nature and spiritualizing religion.[19] Misfortune was to be spiritualized as being in accordance with the will of God and magic along with other "popular cultural forms" were to be dismissed as superstitious.[20] In addition to the colonial intrusions of European countries into the lands of Africa, Asia, and the Americas, local practices on these respective soils became associated not only with magic and superstition but also with the primitive. As discussed above, these so-called primitive cultures, like European women, were associated with moral

and intellectual weakness, wildness, and danger. For those marginalized within patriarchal institutions, slave economies, and colonial territories religious practices and spiritual technologies (such as herbalism, ritual, and other performative strategies) provided extra-institutional access to sacred power. These practices and technologies served as alternative ways to exert agency and mitigate the effects of their struggles against economic deprivation, illness, and the intrusion of institutional power into their lives. Authorities of the institutional churches both Catholic and Protestant were engaged in a continuous battle to stamp out what were considered heretical and pagan practices that to the church flouted divine and natural law. Moreover, these prohibitive and punitive measures, which in Bourdieuian terms constitute acts of overt and symbolic violence, especially targeted marginalized women and men who were exercising agency in ways not in accordance with the will of institutional authorities.

Yvonne Chireau suggests that despite this history of bifurcation and demonization the "survival of a kind of magical spirituality" or a supernatural worldview remained a part of the African American religious and cultural experience. Chireau defines supernaturalism as "a perspective that acknowledges the accessibility and efficacy of the spiritual realm in human life"[21] and rejects the devaluation of magic or, in African American traditional culture, conjuring as associated with the primitive, irrational, coercive, pagan, and illicit.[22]

Jackson's resonance with this supernatural aspect of African American mystic culture is evident in her journal entries. Nevertheless, she questions this use of sacred power. The divine response muffles[23] the historical echoes of institutional symbolic violence that have suppressed black women's local practices. When Jackson becomes concerned that her performance that results in the cessation of rain would be considered sin, God uses this occasion to reveal to her that just as she has the ability to affect her material environment she also has the power of self-control and social agency.

> Thou has done no wrong, but if thou can climb to heaven and take hold of the clouds, which are above thy reach, and have power over them, then thou can have power over thy light and trifling

> nature, and over thy own body also. Thy make must be unmade and remade, and thou must be made a new creature.[24]

The divine response to Jackson's feelings of anxiety[25] is to affirm her power and authority to create an environment in which she can perform her work and ministry. Jackson is determined not to cower to evil for she believed God had established her as a witness to do an important work and she was sure that it was God who would enable her. At the same time, she wants to establish divine authority as the impetus behind her spiritual gifts and power. While she is most often fearless about naming sin and evil and believes in divine retribution as a consequence, Jackson also understands that she too, is accountable to root out sin in her own life. God makes it clear to Jackson that in her religious quest she is engaging in a process of recreation that meant deconstruction and reconstruction not only of an oppressive worldview but also of the self. The fact that she is being "unmade" and "made again" places her life and ministry in humble perspective. As Collins suggests, it is important for black women to accept and balance power in ways that transcend fear and subjugating humiliation and also acknowledge agency and a need for accountability in how they use their power. This is true even for those who are excluded or marginalized from the sources of institutional authority. Jackson's critical distancing and self-reflection help to balance the power she possesses by allowing her to remain in touch with the limitations of her humanity and her deep sense of integrity. Having established a moral balance with respect to her religious character and agency she is better able to embrace these supernatural dimensions of her mystical spirituality. As a result, Jackson continues to access spiritual power in performative and efficacious ways. Thus, she represents conjurational aspects of African American female mysticism.

This penchant for exercising power in her mystical spirituality is also reflected in her practice of spiritualism. In her book *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, Catherine L. Albanese charts the course of nineteenth-century American spiritualism as rooted in an "American metaphysics" that is the result of a "combinative venture with beginnings in numerous places and times."[26] She describes the influence of Western, Near Eastern, and North

African religious and philosophical traditions as well as Anglo and European folk perspectives. She also explores immigrant Asian and African as well as indigenous Native American regional traditions and practices. All of these traditions contribute to a "kaleidoscope of sources" that has influenced the development of American spiritualism.[27] In North America, Shakers were particularly careful to document spiritualist practices and experiences of visitations, visions, and séances. Albanese specifically cites Jackson's experiences as one of the few black Shakers whose spiritualist practices are recorded. She cites Jackson's "personal visionary spirit visit" by Ann Lee, Native Americans, and "East" Indians among others. Jackson reports many instances of speaking with the dead—other Shakers, her late brother Joseph Cox, and her husband Samuel. What is significant about Albanese's exploration is that she presents this source material to support the idea that Jackson's "spiritualist theology . . . conformed to her Methodist sanctified and Shaker past."[28] Albanese argues, however, that Jackson's "visionary conventions" were largely informed by her A M E past. She then posits the question of what possible influence might African American culture have had on Jackson's spiritualist theology. Albanese concludes that

> [i]t is difficult to answer solely in terms of race. Rather, the distinctiveness of Jackson's spiritualism seems more a function of the combinative background she brought to it—not only her blackness but also her own trance-susceptible nature; the nature of her lived experience with others (conflicts with husband, brother, and Watervliet Shaker elders, but consolation and intimacy from Rebecca Perot); her protoholiness and sanctified Methodist past; and her post-Civil War metaphysical religion, both in and out of the spiritualist fold.[29]

That beliefs and practices related to seeing and conversing with spirits are an important part of African American mystic culture is evident from a survey of slave narrative reports of experiences of haints, ghosts, and spirits.[30] In her discussion of the beginnings of American spiritualism, Albanese surveys the scholarly discourse on the existence and development of an African American ethos that embraces practices of communing with the dead. It has already been established above that Jackson's practices can be placed

within the category of African American magical spirituality or supernaturalism as defined by Chireau. Chireau further recognizes that African Americans are "heirs" to a "vibrant mélange of traditions, theologies, and styles"[31] that are informed by this ethos. In Albanese's exploration she also cites Leonard E. Barrett's description of a West African creed and Maulana Karenga's synopsis of elements of West African religious beliefs and their influences on African American belief systems. Moreover, she cites Mechal Sobel's description of the "fashioning of African/American sacred cosmos" and the development of a North American, southern-based "Afro-Baptist" worldview.[32]

In her work, Albanese focuses particularly on John Thornton's contribution of a "revelation epistemology" rooted in practices and perspectives common to West African religions and Christianity in the "Atlantic world." As Stewart and Chireau have argued these commonalities include experiences of conversing with "otherworldly" entities. They each also emphasize the necessity of having someone in the community who is able to mediate and interpret these communications. The persons who receive and interpret these communications occupy "central positions in an economy of interaction and relationship in which . . . the exchanges between worldly and otherworldly intelligence, functioned at the center of spirituality."[33] In his book *African and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800*, Thornton presents his understanding of a revelation epistemology as the primary source of religious knowledge.[34] As Albanese reports, Thornton argues that revelation is prior to religious knowledge. Religious knowledge is first revealed from otherworldly entities through various forms. Human beings were to interpret these revelations and then act upon them. For Thornton, religious philosophy is not a first-order knowledge, it is merely an interpretation of previously experienced revelation.[35] Stewart also recognizes the importance of revelation or divination as one of the primary features of African and African diasporic religions.[36]

For Rebecca Cox Jackson, visionary dreams are foundational forms of otherworldly communications. She ascribes to a belief in continuous divine revelations in history by way of dreams and visions, although she is aware that others within the nineteenth-century cultural context do not ascribe to the same belief. Jackson

sets forth an epistemological framework in her journal entries. This framework is based on her dream of three books. In 1836 while asleep she dreamt of being guided[37] through a room in which three books were positioned on three different tables. The first lay on a north-facing table, the second on a west-facing table, and the third was lying on the east side of the room. The vision continued as a waking dream as the guide continued to instruct her in her meditations and her reading. Although Jackson does not provide an interpretation of the dream in 1836 she is certain that this dream is foundational as a source of knowledge not only for her but also for her religious community. In her journal Jackson writes:

> After I saw these three books it was made known to me that they were agoing to be revealed from Heaven by revelation of God, and I should see them, and at times I would feel to speak of them. This was in 1836.[38]

Jackson's emphasis on the year in which she experienced this vision is critical. For she dates this dream as prior to the publication of Shaker texts *The Holy Sacred and Divine Roll and Book* (*A Sacred Roll and Book*) printed in 1843 and the *Divine Book of Holy Wisdom (Holy Mother Wisdom* and *The Word of God, Out of Whose Mouth Goeth a Sharp Sword*) in 1849. Jackson's dream also occurs just ahead of the great spiritualist revivals that began in the late 1830s and continued into the 1850s.[39] While visionary experiences, the emphasis on spiritual gifts, and ecstatic encounters were previously reoccurring phenomena in Shaker circles and in other religious communities, this "Era of Manifestations" was inaugurated in August of 1837 when a group of girls, ages 10 to 14, were reported to have gone into trance, conversed with angels, and traveled to "heavenly places." This era was subsequently dubbed the "remarkable period" of "Mother Ann's Work."[40] It was during this Era of Manifestations that Stewart Philemon received "special revelations" that produced the *Sacred and Divine Roll*. This two-part book contained Bible quotes, theological and historical reflections, moral advice, as well as testimonies of prophets and angels.[41] It was claimed that this book was to be taken as equal in authority to the Bible. Later Eldress Paulina Bates penned *The Divine Book* that contained spiritualist reflections revealed to

the "line of the female" because women were considered to be in "Wisdom's Likeness."[42] Bates was proclaimed a "prophetess unto the Most High."[43]

In 1844 Jackson receives further clarification of the 1836 dream's meaning. She identifies the first book as "the book which the Spirit taught" her the second as the book she is taught by Jesus, "the Father of the new creation," and the third "the Book which the Bride, the Lamb's wife" teaches her daily.[44] In this further interpretation Jackson confirms the primacy of the Spirit in her revelation epistemology. In her epistemology framework the Spirit guides her in all spiritual and ethical knowledge. With the Spirit as guide, Jackson embraces a sanctified life style that, as Albanese states, is consistent with both Jackson's AME background and the Shaker worldview. Therefore, she begins to further embrace ideas that are in concert with Shaker doctrine.

Jackson maintains, however, that she did not come to these foundational beliefs as a result of being converted into the Shaker fold. Rather, she insists that many of these ideas were revealed to her by the Spirit *first* (or by the tutelage of otherworldly entities within her sacred-social network of spirit guides) and then she subsequently discovered that these ideas were a part of the Shaker belief system. In 1864 Jackson describes how she obtained a copy of *The Holy Sacred and Divine Roll and Book*. In that journal entry she reports that Mary Jones, one of the Shaker sisters, remarks that many of Jackson's sayings are in the book. Humez remarks that this scene is reminiscent of Jackson's description of her first visit to the Watervliet Shaker site in 1842. After that visit the "little band" of people that accompanied her from Philadelphia also remarked that sayings in the book were similar to what Jackson had already been teaching them.[45]

In 1864 Jackson also writes that the "mystery of the three books was made known [to her] by revelation." The first book referred to the Bible; however, the vision makes it clear that it is only through divine revelation in the human soul that the recipient can understand the spiritual meaning of "the letter" of the book. The second book refers to the Shaker text *Sacred Roll* and the third book in the vision refers to the *Divine Book of Holy Wisdom*. Jackson goes on to explain that the Shaker texts revealed to her in her 1836 dream "were not written by mortal hands till

1840, '41,' '42,' and '43.'"[46] Thus, in Jackson's epistemological framework she acknowledges the primacy of the Spirit's guidance by way of dreams and visions to reveal a way of holiness subsequently and formally adopted by the Shaker hierarchy. By suggesting that the Spirit revealed this information to Jackson first, Jackson underscores her belief in her own religious authority and power to access divine knowledge.

Revelation epistemologies such as that to which Jackson subscribes have often been rejected in modern and postmodern discourse. Modern epistemologies are influenced by Cartesian methodology based on the well-known assertion, *ego cogito ergo sum*, "I think therefore, I am." Post-Enlightenment *episteme* have focused on the goal of pursuing certainty with respect to knowledge. That certainty according to Renee Descartes is to be found within "man." The modern focus on the Subject places a premium on the Subject as a rational being. Certainty is assured and doubt is exorcised by the rational Subject's comprehension of an object.[47] However, the fundamental problem with modern epistemological methods as critiqued by liberationists, feminists, womanists, and postmodernists, is the same fundamental problem with modern methodologies in general—it is the problem of dualistic thinking. Descartes's methodological approach assumes dichotomies between rationality and irrationality, subject and object. This dichotomous framework has formed the basis for a modern episteme. Postmodern thinkers provided the most radical critique of modern epistemologies by rejecting the notion of a knowing universal Subject altogether, as well as any notion that an autonomous Subject can obtain knowledge by comprehending an object separate from itself. Postmodernists have argued that "Subjects" are always historically situated and that knowledge is acquired through collective discourse.[48]

Voices of those speaking from the margins such as black theologians and womanist and feminists thinkers have critiqued both modern epistemological methodologies and postmodern thought regarding their respective ideas about the Subject. The primary critique of the modern Subject based on dichotomous thinking is that the rational Subject is often synonymous with white, privileged, and male. The devaluation of poor, black, and female persons meant that people who fit within these categories were

often not included as Subjects in modern discourses. Moreover, the privileging of rational ways of knowing excluded ways of knowing and being informed by other human aspects such as emotional intelligence, body consciousness, experience, and so on. The postmodern critique that rejected the notion of the autonomous Subject altogether came at a point in history when marginalized voices around the world were finally asserting themselves as Subjects in diverse discourses and gaining autonomy from white masculinist thought. Furthermore, the postmodern idea of the Subject seemed to be a passive individual protected from the responsibility of asserting agency and engaging in resistance activity as a means of opposing oppressive social forces. Womanist, feminist, and liberationists emphasize agency and resistance as necessary for survival and liberation. As Collins contends, black female epistemologies tend to reject dichotomous thinking and embrace a both/and, inclusive approach to knowledge. African American women's epistemologies validate black women's experience as a starting point for and embrace black women as Subjects in contemporary discourses and religious traditions. This approach affirms both rational and trans-rational sources of knowledge. Mystical experiences as trans-rational sources of knowledge have "significant implications for the theory of knowledge."[49]

William J. Wainwright argues that all mystical experience can contribute to epistemology because the consciousness of the mystic is able to grasp realities, which are inaccessible to other sources of knowledge.[50] These mystical experiences, which are forceful enough to open the mystic to reorganization of her doctrinal or belief systems, are authoritative for the individual. William James adds that mystical sources of knowledge are significant for the individual in that mystical states demonstrate that rational sources of knowledge constitute only one source of knowledge, one kind of consciousness. Mystical experience, however, exposes the individual to the possibilities of other sources of "truth." But what is the significance of knowledge claimed by mystics for the wider community? While James acknowledges that knowledge attained through mystical encounter is "absolutely authoritative for the individual who experiences it," he also contends that these mystical claims should not be accepted uncritically by those who stand outside of the mystical experience yielding the knowledge

claimed.[51] Contemporary scholars argue that mystical claims should be supported by external evidence if they are to be considered valid at all.[52] On the other hand, Howard Thurman contends that while it is necessary to make an attempt to find external data that can validate mystical claims, the real significance of these claims rests not upon their proof but upon the integrity of the personal response of the mystic to an experience that is "vital, total and absolute."[53]

Thurman emphasizes that it is the individual who experiences ultimate meaning through the encounter, and while the individual is finite and limited, he suggests that her experience is meaningful and significant nonetheless. Thurman argues that the "truth" encountered in mystical experience is not novel or original in the sense that the mystic discovers something new. Instead, according to Thurman, mystical encounter means a "rediscovery of the eternal."[54] Thus, mystical encounter is not a private claim to "truth" for the mystic. Rather, the mystic enters into, or opens herself up to an ocean of fluid knowledge, understanding, reality, or "truth" that anyone who takes the time to be attentive can discover. Therefore, mystical knowledge is not privileged. Instead, mystical experience gives rise to a "democratic" access to truth, and can be "scrutinized by community."[55] Mystical knowledge is validated by the integrity of personal encounter, the verification of which arises out of "one's own center of life."[56] The idea that mystical knowledge is accessible by social groups is in keeping with Jackson's revelation epistemology. Jackson is a participant in the spiritualist revival even before she becomes a member of the Shakers. The democratic access to spiritual knowledge provides an expansive quality to the lives of the marginalized including the black women who make up a large part of Jackson's religious community. This access makes spiritual resources, gifts, and abilities, viewed as unavailable to, or unworthy of, those deemed "Other" by a culture of domination, available and accessible to the "least of these." In this way, marginalized African American women such as Jackson, have access to divine knowledge outside of institutional authority and control. Revelation epistemology through mystical encounter provides access to a repository of knowledge that empowers women such as Jackson to access information regarding the contours of their sacred-social universe and

the material conditions that often affect their lives. Revelation in this context is access to "eternal" knowledge reverberating across historical epochs, irrupting into social spaces in different geographical locations and through diverse physical manifestations.

Jackson's revelations precede the publication of two authoritative Shaker texts documenting manifestations that either were considered equal to biblical authority (with respect to the *Sacred and Divine Roll*) or to be ascribed to powerful instruments of God in the case of (*The Divine Book*). This knowledge and validation imbues Jackson with authority not given by any institution, but confirmed by a revelation epistemology that provides extra-institutional access to spiritual knowledge. As Cupitt suggests, African American mystical writings, which I would argue are based on revelation epistemologies, in some ways echo the post-modern insistence on destabilization. That Jackson's revelations have a destabilizing affect is apparent. Before her 1836 vision Jackson writes, "I was so buried in the depth of the tradition of my fore fathers, that it did seem as if I never could be dug up."[57] As a result of her vision, Jackson claims autonomous, or perhaps a theonomous[58] authority to act outside of the institutional authority of her brother and "fathers" and claim a different religious path. Thus, knowledge, power, and authority gives rise to a rediscovery of the eternal, the bestowal of gifts, and "consolations," as well as newly revealed and revised religious insights, images, and language that then have an impact on the communities and environment in which she lived. This knowledge, based on a revelation epistemology, provides Jackson with spiritual capital. I will discuss Jackson and spiritual capital further in chapter 6.

Jackson relies primarily upon God's divine direction and instruction as well as her "gifts of power" to protect her and give her courage as she negotiates relationships within a cultural matrix of domination. She also relies upon her talks with God and her dreams and visions to provide her with the knowledge, authority, and power to carry out her religious work. Because she depends upon her inner voice to guide her, Jackson is adamant about the need to distinguish the voice of God from other voices. To further punctuate the destabilizing effects of Jackson's revelation epistemology, subsequent to her vision of the three books (actually

within the same month), Jackson makes it a point to reject any voice or authority not consistent with the voice or guidance within. This places her in great conflict with her husband and brother as well as the male leadership in the AME Church. These men accuse her of trying to break up the church and of usurping male authority. As mentioned above, her brother was very deeply connected to the AME Church and its leadership. However, he would not use his influence to assist Jackson in her pursuit of preaching and leadership opportunities within the denomination. According to Jackson, her brother even failed to follow through on his promise to teach her how to read.

Literacy was a critical avenue for African American women and men to gain social capital—access to power, resources, and even freedom—in ante- and postbellum North America.[59] It provided a means for the marginalized to participate in the unsaying of the ideologies and principles that support structures of domination by engaging in critical thought and dialogue as Subjects. Jackson is determined to gain access to the resources that would enable her to sustain a "strong mind" or religious determination in the midst of persecution and trouble. Jackson is the only one of her siblings who does not know how to read. At first she feels dependent upon her brother to teach her because her duties as wife, caretaker of her husband and her brother's children, and her work as a seamstress takes up so much time. Jackson explains that her brother's time is also taken up with his work and duties at the church. What is most troubling to Jackson, however, is that when she would ask her brother to write letters for her, rather than recording *her* words he would write his own version. Jackson chastises him saying, "I don't want you to *word* my letter. I only want thee to *write* it." Resolute that she would be able to read the Bible for herself Jackson goes to God for assistance.

> One day I was sitting finishing a dress in haste and in prayer. This word was spoken in my mind, "Who learned the first man on earth?" "Why, God." "He is unchangeable, and if He learned the first man to read, He can learn you." I laid down my dress, picked up my Bible, ran upstairs, opened it, and kneeled down with it pressed against my breast, prayed earnestly to Almighty God if it was consisting to His holy will, to learn me to read His holy word. And when I looked on the word, I began to read.[60]

God responds to Jackson's impassioned plea and desire to read by giving her the gift of literacy.

Living in the nineteenth century, it was expected that Jackson would conform to the religious and social dictates of the patriarchal culture. Within this culture it is her role and duty as a woman to serve her husband and take care of the household. She is expected to be obedient and know her "place" both in the black institutional church and in white households. As a transactional body once again her gifts and skills are to be used to support the patriarchal institutions of the black family and church. Yet Jackson often acts in ways that run counter to these expectations. For example, after her soul awakening and her conversion-possession experience, Jackson yearns to be single. Her yearning for freedom from her conjugal duties arose not only out of her desire to be singularly devoted to God's service but also out of her resistance to her husband's attempts to control her. She chooses celibacy as a means of providing her the space to break free from her husband's control and to focus her vital energies on her devotion to God.

Celibacy has been an important practice among mystics and those devoted to the religious life in Western Christian, African, and African Diaspora traditions. Within these traditions celibacy, along with other spiritual practices, was understood to enable the devotee to wholly detach him or herself from distracting appetites in order to wholly commit to the work of spiritual development and religious service.

> Celibacy is…a pervasive theme in attaining a state conducive to communicating with spirits—shamans and vodoun priests and priestesses must practice short-term abstinence during their apprenticeship and as a tool of their trade. This celibacy heightens their awareness and sensitivity and conciliates the gods.[61]

Throughout Christian history women, as an exercise in agency, have proclaimed themselves virgins regardless of their sexual, childbearing, or marriage history as a way of establishing themselves as self-defining, fully liberated human beings whose lives were not derivative of any male member of their family or household.[62] Hyun Kyung Chung contends that virginity, as a state of being, was not based on a woman's sexual practice or any other

external condition, rather it was reflective of her inner freedom and authority. Chung states:

> When a woman defines herself according to her own understanding of who she really is and what she is meant for in this universe (and not according to the rules and norms of patriarchy), she is a virgin.[63]

The practice of celibacy was one of the elements of Shakerism that inspired Jackson to become a part of the Shaker community. Mother Ann Lee, founder of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing or the Shakers, practiced celibacy as a way of emancipating herself from the perils of childbearing and the confines of married life in eighteenth-century Manchester, England. As a young woman, Lee was pressured into marriage and thus felt compelled to submit to fulfilling her "conjugal duties." Ann Lee gave birth to four children, all of whom died.[64] The pain and loss she suffered as a poor female affected by the circumscribed roles of her time contributed to Ann Lee's repudiation of sex in her marriage as well as the notion that "sex had caused humankind's alienation from God."[65] For Ann Lee, celibacy was the pathway to spiritual enlightenment and rebirth.[66]

> Through the lens of Christian celibacy…women…seize[d] on this new doctrine as a tool to emancipate themselves from the drudgery of marriage and childbearing. Determinedly celibate, they transformed themselves into independent people who traveled extensively, studied at a time when education was a male preserve, wrote, preached, and directed their own lives, frequently in the chaste company of like-spirited women or men.[67]

For Jackson, choosing celibacy was an act of religious devotion and social agency. I would also argue that Jackson's call to celibacy might also suggest the Yoruba religious practice of priests and priestesses becoming the spouses of the deities, which may require a celibate life. Jackson's choice was also an act of resistance against patriarchal control. Accepting subjugation to the will and desire of her husband was counter to who she is as Subject and would interfere with her service to God. Jackson often writes about the controlling actions of her husband Samuel and

his attempts to suppress the spirit within her and interfere with her religious work. Samuel's attempts to control her went so far that he even attempted to kill her. Jackson relies upon her gifts of power, in this case specifically the gift of foreknowledge to avoid Samuel's threatening behavior and possible violence.

Violence has been an all too common part of black women's lives. Nineteenth-century African American women were not only vulnerable to sexual violence at the hands of white men; they also (as did white women) faced the possibility of physical and sexual violence within their own homes. Samuel resorts to threats of violence to regain control over Jackson as he assumes what he believes to be his right and duty as a man within a patriarchal culture. While scholars have often discussed the sexual and physical violence perpetrated by white men against black women and girls during the period of slavery and beyond, there has been little discussion regarding the domestic violence and abuse black women and girls may have faced within their own homes. During the nineteenth century the culture viewed women as the property or possessions of their husbands. Black men, slave or free, no less than white men, saw the ability to possess and claim authority over their wives or domestic partners as a right of manhood.[68]

> Male attitudes in the mid-nineteenth century, when Black militancy was at its peak, also reflected a sharpened resolve to take possession of that which had been denied to them. In 1855 a Black convention of male leaders declared, "As a people, we have been denied the ownership of our bodies, our wives, home, children and the products of our own labor." The convention men resolved to "vindicate our manhood, command our respect and claim the attention and admiration of the civilized world."[69]

Violence against women often occurred as men used violence and abuse as a means of gaining and maintaining control over their wives. They viewed this ability to control their wives not only as socially normative, but as God-given. Historian Deborah White offers scattered reports of female slaves who were abused by their husbands.[70] Little documentation exists regarding violence against nineteenth-century black women given the invisibility of these women's lives and the lack of legal protections for African American people. In light of the cultural and familial norms that

assumed a husband's right to control his wife, even with violence, Jackson chooses celibacy as an assertion of self—a self-governed not by the dictates of men but by the power of the divine. Her husband's acts of violence sets the stage for a particular conjuncture at which Jackson is transformed and engages in transformative self-assertion. In this assertion of self she claims authority over her own body and rejects the authority of men over her body, or her life.

Jackson receives gifts of power by which she claims and assumes authority as well. One of the early spiritual gifts Jackson displays is the gift of healing. She first begins to exercise this gift on the day of a quarterly "love feast" at Bethel AME Church. Her husband Samuel wanted Jackson to go with him to the feast. Jackson, however, would not do anything unless the Lord "commanded" it. So she refuses to go. Samuel remains at home with her. After they had eaten dinner Jackson bolted up from the table and asked Samuel if he would go with her to visit "three sick people." When Samuel asks Jackson why she had not told him earlier that this was the reason she could not go to the feast, Jackson replies that she did not know herself until that moment. She goes on to describe how she visited three persons—two sick men, and a widow woman, and prays for each of them. Each in turn is healed. In every one of these healings Jackson locates the ill person by an inner leading of "the true Spirit of God."[71] She makes clear that she was correct in her discernment—that she should not have gone to the love feast. Had she gone she would not have been available to provide healing assistance. Jackson conveys her conviction to Samuel.

> Now you see why it was that I could not go to the love feast. You ought not groan at me so . . . now you see for yourself that I have been led this night by the true Spirit of God. How much better it was for me to visit them poor sick than for me to go to the love feast. You knowed I wished you to go, and you know, Samuel, I always want you to do and go wherever you feel—I am always satisfied. Only leave me free to obey my blessed Lord and Savior.[72]

After receiving such dramatic gifts of power and developing a strong discernment of the inner voice of the Spirit, Jackson could

no longer be "bound by the tradition of [her] fathers." Her actions demonstrated a radical detachment from these traditions. She announced that she could no longer serve her husband; she was totally committed to God and her ministry among the people. Her marriage ended and she broke with the institutional church. Jackson's ability to challenge external authority and listen to her inner voice is grounded in the relationship between power, knowledge, and authority in Jackson's mystical experiences. She became an itinerant preacher and travelled holding meetings for bands of women and men across the Northeast.

Mother of New Creation: Community Building via Feminina

Clothed in new being Jackson set out to find a religious community that promoted and valued the theological and ethical perspectives she had developed under the tutorship of the Spirit. Eventually she would join the Shakers.[73] The Shakers appealed to Jackson because, unlike the AME Church, women and men shared leadership roles within the life of the community. The Shaker notion of God also embraced female images. As already discussed, the Shaker spiritual practice included celibacy, a practice to which Jackson was already dedicated. The knowledge Jackson gained by way of mystical experience enabled her to subvert the masculinist theology and language of the institutional churches. Her visions yielded language, imagery, and religious notions that were viewed as heretical by male clergy and leadership. Consequently, she is barred from speaking at local churches. Jackson is adamant about acting and speaking according to her inner authority rather than adhering to the dictates of church doctrine and institutional protocol. In rejecting the patriarchal traditions of the churches, Jackson recovers the female aspect of the divine.

> I received word of understanding how the Spirit of Wisdom was the Mother of the children.…I was in the spirit speaking these words to the glory of God: "I know Thee by revelation, Oh Thou Mother, Thou Spirit of Wisdom, I was begotten in Thee and brought forth, though I knew Thee not. They that have revelation

> must live it, that they may see the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Oh, how I love thee, my Mother! I did not know that I had a Mother. She was with me, though I knew it not"…And then I could also see how often I had been led, comforted, and counseled in the time of trial by a tender Mother and knowed it not.[74]

In rejecting the tradition of her "fathers," Jackson creates a critical distance from the patriarchal familial and ecclesial institutions that had attempted to subjugate her. Her conversion-possession experience affirms and solidifies her unique personality and call to ministry in ways that allowed her to create and inhabit a complex subjectivity that transcends the social and cultural notions of female identity, roles, and purpose. She also is enabled to envision the divine as female. Jackson embraces a "Mother in the Deity" who protects, consoles, and comforts. She provides for, and empowers Jackson to do her ministry. By replacing the church's masculine language for God with more inclusive images of divinity Jackson fully asserts female authority and power within her sacred-social world. Her conversion-possession experience affirmed and solidified her unique personality and soul calling. Through prayer, literacy, and the exercise of gifts of power Jackson gained knowledge and understanding via feminina, by recovering an image of deity that affirmed her as being made in the image of God and gave her the authority to challenge institutional power. Patriarchal religion had rendered the female aspects of the deity so invisible that Jackson's conscious awareness of the Mother had been erased. Through mystical encounter, Jackson engages in a profound act of unsaying, a decolonization of mind and spirit. Consequently, she accesses images via feminina and sees the Spirit of Wisdom, Christ, and Creator as female. Jackson's discovery of how the Divine Mother had been with her all along prompted Jackson to search for a spiritual community that would support her devotion to a female God. Jackson claims that this came to her in 1834 or 1835. Her first exposure to the Shakers would be her visit to the community at Watervliet, New York, in that autumn of 1836. She would visit again in 1843 and would reside there from 1847 to 1851.[75]

6

Weaving the Spider's Web: African American Female Mystical Activism

In the previous chapters, we have explored the spiritual narratives and mystical experiences of three icons of black female spirituality and religious activism—Jarena Lee, Sojourner Truth, and Rebecca Cox Jackson. I focused primarily on these three women's autobiographies because together their texts represent a broad range of religious phenomena prevalent in African American mystic culture that, while sometimes "complementary" to and even associated with Western Christian mystical traditions, are rooted in a larger African American ethos shaped by African diasporic values and belief patterns. While all three of these women are usually identified solely within the Protestant Christian tradition their notions of the divine do not fit neatly into a closed monotheism. The religious forms they practice arise out of a culture of contact among African, Anglo-American, and Native American peoples and traditions. These cultures of contact inform a North American religious and cultural habitus that is shaped by the respective orientations, dispositions, and ritual strategies of its contributing cultures.

Although these nineteenth-century African American women adopted Anglo-Protestant religious forms, I argue that they did so through a particular dispositional lens or orientation. This orientation involves the following features associated with African diasporic orientations: flexible ideas about the nature of divinity, high value placed on the possession of special powers or special kinds of knowledge, a primary focus on spiritual efficacy as an

J.R. Bostic, *African American Female Mysticism*

important goal of religious practice, fluid boundaries between visible and invisible worlds, and belief in a plurality of beings who participate in one's sacred-social network to bring about and maintain healing and wholeness. Supported by the inhabitants of their sacred-social worlds, these women asserted themselves as religious Subjects by way of mystical experiences. These experiences included visions, dreams, and other ecstatic phenomena that served as mediating experiences for these women to access and be transformed by sacred power. I also argue that within the mystical space of these visitations these women also mediated sacred power in service of their communities. As a result of these spatial practices and mystical experiences, black women individually and the gathered communities with whom they participated are able to lay hold to revelation epistemologies that provide empowerment and meaning on an individual and collective level. Such knowledge claims aid in the process of identity construction that seals the practitioner or practitioners against the "Grand Invasion" of hegemonic power and enables her or him to reclaim and embrace embodied ways of being and knowing that are liberative and emancipatory.

Thus, the emancipatory mystical spaces such as those mediated by women such as Lee, Truth, and Jackson give rise to new configurations in communal relationships and collective action. The sacred-social worlds of African American women that help produce these new configurations can be effectively represented by the spider's web. In chapter 3, we saw how Jarena Lee utilizes the image of the spider's web as a way to convey the protective power of the divine. The spider's web marks the boundaries of emancipatory mystical space in which the human soul is enabled to recognize and contend with destructive forces and at the same time engage in a self-reflective and critical assessment of her own relationship to these forces. In this chapter, I want to further explore the image of the spider and the spider's web as metaphors for the sacred-social worlds of African American female mysticism in general, and as a metaphor for the African American female soul as a microcosm of these worlds in particular. To further interpret the significance of these images, I include an analysis of the spider and the spider's web as metaphor in the three major cultures of contact that converged and collided to establish the nineteenth-century North American habitus of African American women.

The spider as symbol and the spider's web as metaphor have been utilized in the works of Christian theologians who have engaged in what Beldan C. Lane describes as "arachnological research or arachnologies." The use of the spider as a symbol, according to Lane, reflects both the fascination and the tensions cultures have with the spider. For example, Augustine employs the spider as a symbol in his *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, or sermons on the Psalms. In *Ennarationes*, Augustine expresses his admiration for the spider as an "exemplar of quiet contemplation" and, at the same time, critiques the character of the spider as one of "moral weakness" because of the ways spiders hide from, and stalk their prey.[1] As we have already discussed in chapter 3, the Anglo-Protestant use of the spider's web as religious metaphor was informed by Jonathan Edwards's dramatic imagery that highlights the web's weakness and fragility. Thus, the web in Edwards's thought speaks to human impotence in the light of an angry God and a world full of sin. Lane argues that Edwards's use of the spider as symbol reflects his Calvinistic theology and is meant to engage the listener/reader in the spider's "performance," as a mirror-image of the sinners own performance in the call to conversion.[2] The participant is "encouraged to imagine themselves in the place of the spider . . . aware of that towering uncertainty, the horrible threat of non-being" that accompanies a life of sin outside the protection of God's saving grace. In the Western Christian tradition, the spider as symbol often represents elements that either epitomize or clash with virtues of Christian character.

In Native American and West African traditions, however, the spider and the spider's web can take on a much broader significance. Certain aspects of these cultural traditions employ the spider and the spider's web as a metaphor for sacred-social worldviews or cosmological understandings. These ideas have circulated widely within the culture of contact of North America. For example, in Navajo tradition the Spider Woman serves as a signifier representing "the Navajo universe."[3] In Navajo storytelling tradition the Navajo women learned how to weave textiles from Spider Woman. While Spider Man instructed the Navajos on how to construct their looms, Spider Woman taught the women how to weave the textile patterns that represent different parts of the Navajo universe. The Spider Woman and her loom represent "the Navajo universe in microcosm and in metaphor." The intricate weaves of the textiles

constructed on Spider Woman's loom represents the integrated interconnection among diverse "cosmic forces" such as power, beauty, and fertility. The activity of weaving on a loom is a performance of "universal integration" and an expression of "cosmic holism." It is a metaphor for how the weaver marks sacred space symbolized by natural boundaries containing elemental forces and inhabited by "Holy People," animals, and plants.[4] The loom embodies a micro version of the Navajo cosmos and the weave, through its patterns, connects the people's history with cosmological forces that together convey a particular and dynamic ethos or worldview embedded within the culture.

The symbol of the spider and the weaving of the spider's web also signify notions of "cosmic holism" and express a particular and dynamic ethos associated with West African and African-derived worldviews. The symbol of the spider in these traditions is conveyed through various constructions and interpretations of Anansi[5] the spider. In West African, US American, and Caribbean oral histories the spider is known by many spellings of his name. He is Anansi, Ananse, and Anancy. In Ghana, Anansi is known as a "creative cultural hero" or spider deity who was rewarded by Nayame, the Sky God, and brought back the gift of storytelling to the people.[6] According to Shanna Benjamin Greene, Anansi's storytelling holds great power for the living community. As a deity or as a spider god Anansi weaves stories and tales that constitute in many ways a "web of life" that serves as a guide and witness to collective wisdom and the communal past, present, and future. As a spider and weaver of the web of life Anansi observes and understands the world from the vantage point of liminal space—as one "suspended" "between heaven and earth."[7] Therefore, Anansi serves as a mediator between the sacred and social dimensions and acts as an advocate for human beings before the deities. In so doing Anansi arbitrates, facilitates, and reconciles these different spaces and diverse ways of knowing. The stories Anansi weaves are a source for communal life.[8]

Ananse also is known as a trickster figure in West African, Caribbean, and North American cultures. As a trickster, Ananse may be viewed as either a cultural hero or a villain. Renee Harrison distinguishes between these roles. Harrison states that the trickster as villain "engages in maleficent violence (harmful, destructive)"

whereas the trickster as cultural hero "engages in beneficent violence (regenerative, retributive) by using talismans, charms, rituals, potions, and so forth to mediate with deities for protection from enemies, and healing and restoration of communities."[9] Harrison goes on to describe more specifically how the trickster in Yoruba as well as Akan traditions takes on expressions of the heroic or the villainous figure. Within these traditions the trickster is viewed as cunning and shrewd. As a character, he is able to utilize resources in ways that enable him to outwit deities, humans, and animals. As a villain, the trickster is viewed as "predatory," "greedy," and unscrupulous.[10]

Harrison identifies the European slave trader with the character of the villainous trickster. Drawing upon the works of Anne Bailey and Michael Gomez, Harrison states that European slave traders, sanctioned by state and religious authorities, procured the material means (financial capital, ships, weapons, access to ports, etc.) to develop and implement a systematic "plan of engagement" that would ensure European dominance in the modern era.[11] The slave trader's access to the requisite resources needed to lure African people into his traps "transformed" him, according to Harrison, into the villainous trickster—a predator manipulating the fate of human beings for avarice gains. These seductive tactics used by European slave traders to lure Africans into captivity escalated into a full blown "reign of terror" in which slave traders, owners, and their surrogates used force to control enslaved black women, children, and men.[12] It is this use of maleficent violence and forms of physical force that are akin to what Bourdieu refers to as elementary forms of domination. Before self-reproducing structures of domination existed within the developing colonial empire, slave traders and their surrogates utilized direct and overt forms of physical and economic violence to produce and reproduce the conditions of domination that allowed them and their legitimating authorities to maintain power.

The exchange of rewards and punishment continued to perpetuate the system of slavery as it became entrenched in the social, political, and economic life of Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas. As we have already established, within the context of North America slave traders and holders developed a slave holding system that became a self-perpetuating social machine.

Reproduction of this social machine was supported by exercises of symbolic and overt forms of violence as well as by structures within the political, religious, legal, economic, and social fields. While the rules and social order of the slave systems and the prevalent racial and gender hierarchies in many ways became viewed as unquestioned social norms, different classes of persons within existing dominating structures continued to tap into and draw from competing resources from the American culture of contact that enabled them to critique these structures, provide counter narratives, and engage in counter practices. Within African American and African-derived cultural systems oral traditions provided such resources. In American and Caribbean reinterpretation of Anancy the trickster became one of these resources.

In the North American and Caribbean diaspora Anancy is depicted as cultural hero and is a destabilizing figure who serves as a counter hegemonic force against oppressive institutions. In the Caribbean Anancy deconstructs "the fossilized past of the colonized" and serves as "a possible source of fresh creative energy."[13] In North America Anancy confronts hegemonic forces by refusing fixation of identity within the confines of cultural proscriptions. Thus, Anancy as a trickster confronts and critiques the social machines and structures that are assumed normative in a system of domination and acts to turn social hierarchies upside down. Anancy as the cultural hero is deemed heroic because he is able to outsmart, outwit, and exercise a level of independent agency even in a social context in which power is monopolized by a specific dominant class or classes. In the United States during the nineteenth century Anancy appears in African American folklore and oral histories as "Aunt Nancy." "He becomes she."[14] In nineteenth and early twentieth-century oral histories Aunt Nancy is portrayed as the Spider Woman. As both woman and spider she is a hybrid. According to Benjamin, Aunt Nancy's hybridity represents her ability to not only confront and contend with the dualistic consequences of Western hegemonic systems, but her hybridity also enables her to repair and recombine the disconnections that exist among the disparate parts of African American women affected by the symbolic violence of the matrix of domination. Unlike Anancy the male trickster who serves primarily as a destabilizing force and critic against such systems,

Aunt Nancy also serves as a healing "life-force" who has the ability to mediate sacred power in transformative and life-affirming and life-enhancing ways.[15] Aunt Nancy's web represents the complex interconnections that make up the sacred-social network of African American mysticism. The web represents interconnection, liminality, and the relationship between the material and the invisible or the unseen within African American sacred-social worlds. Aunt Nancy serves as the "mistress mediator of liminal space."[16] As such from her viewpoint not only does she inhabit the liminal space suspended "between heaven and earth" destabilizing norms, taboos, and fixed identities, but she also mediates, arbitrates, and reconciles diverse even contradictory epistemologies in light of communal needs.

Aunt Nancy's "physical hybridization" is indicative of African American female spiritualities as well as their social practices and communal performances. In the mystical quest for home, Lee, Truth, Jackson, and other nineteenth-century African American women pursue a desire that includes not only the soul's longing for a home with the Divine Community in the invisible realm, but also finding a home in the material world that can ground not only their sense of being but also support their vocations. While these women sought out and worked to build community their efforts to live full throttled spiritual and social lives was often thwarted by institutional structures that operated to reproduce gendered and racially prescribed roles designed to limit black women's participation, leadership, and power within communities. By way of their mystical experiences and epistemological discoveries these women served as mediators of sacred power. In this way, they worked to arbitrate and reconcile contradictory ways of knowing and being in order to reimagine the prevailing social constructions of race, gender, and class. Within the context of these mystical and communal sites, these women helped to fashion and construct a communal home in which they themselves and members of the community can create and live more freely and fully within the inclusive space of whole communities. Lee, Truth, and Jackson demonstrate this in the ways they searched for, participated in, and formed communal associations.

Jarena Lee actively sought out a home life and religious community that could support her spiritual quest for a vital and cohesive

life of complex subjectivity. Many of these institutions, however, did not fully support her passions and desires. As mentioned in chapter 3, Lee is discouraged by the unwillingness or what she perceives as the inability of her family and employers to teach her the skills needed to establish an intimate relationship with the divine. She travels to Philadelphia and attends what she identifies as the "English church." The pastor of the church was Joseph Pilmore who was trained by John Wesley and became the first Methodist preacher in Philadelphia. Lee reports, however, that a wall existed between her and the members of this Anglican congregation. After attending services at this church it was "impressed upon [her] mind that they were not the people for her."[17] It is clear that Lee does not wholly identify with the operating ethos of this particular congregation. She is, nevertheless, interested in the Methodist denomination. Lee asks the head cook of the house about the rules of the Methodist society to which she belongs. Not daunted by the head cook's assertion that Lee could not abide by the strict rules of the society for even one year, Lee attends the Methodist meeting. The preacher is Richard Allen who would become bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Lee writes that she "had come to the conclusion, that this is the people to which my heart unites."[18] In the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Lee finds a spiritual and communal home that not only is consistent with her own social, religious, and cultural dispositions, but also provides her with the social and spiritual space in which she can perceive and embody "holy energy" fully flowing within her and among the members of the congregational community.

Nineteenth-century African American women searched for connections with the sacred-social network that made up these institutions and communities that nurtured, influenced, and grounded them. The black church community was part of that network. At the same time, as Collins points out black church space has also been a space that is full of conflicts and contradictions for black women.[19] While black churches have historically served as places in which black women can develop a black female culture of resistance to domination and engage in constructive activism, black churches and extended families also serve as sites where dominant ideologies are perpetuated.[20] Black churches and black communities while serving as the context and motivation for black

women's work and ministries also can be spaces in which African American women are not "believed," where their true selves are denied and marginalized.

As discussed above, for Jarena Lee the black church was such a space. While she had felt that she had found a people with which she could experience communion, sexist ideologies still prevented the community from fully accepting and supporting Lee and what she perceived as a religious calling. As Allen would later state in response to Lee's assertion that she was called to preach, the denomination did not license or ordain women in the preaching or pastoral ministries. Thus, when Lee hears a voice that says to her "Go preach the Gospel!" she replies, "No one will believe me."[21] Lee sought divine guidance and prayed for discernment. Her concerns reflect cultural views that either women cannot be called by God or that women's claims to communicate with the divine are not to be believed. At the same time, Lee's rhetorical move to convey her spiritual practices of seeking a place of solitude in which she can discern God's will signals to the reader as well as the nineteenth-century evangelical society that she understands and adheres to the religious structures of conversion and calling that provide justification and authority for individuals claiming to be called by God.

After Lee seeks God through these spiritual practices and conversion-calling processes, she experiences a vision of a pulpit with a Bible lying upon it. Lee records that the following night she actually "took a text" and preached it in her sleep. Lee preached so powerfully that she and the rest of the family were awakened by the sound of her voice thundering in the darkness. She was then convinced that God had indeed called her to preach.[22] Along with black church space, family homes serve as sites and institutions that can be filled with contradictions. While families both immediate and extended provide support and nurturing for African American females they also can help to perpetuate ideologies and practices that assume strict and limited roles for girls and women within family and social structures. The bestowal of divine authority and Lee's mediation of divine power within this domestic space may be an indication of the importance of familial validation for African American women. Lee's mediating role within the mystical space of her pulpit vision may have provided

a shield of protection and legitimation that would have made it difficult for her extended family to deny her spiritual power and authority. Frohlich discusses the fragmenting effects that patriarchal family structures and institutions can have on young females, when they demand that these young women remain bound by conventionally gendered roles.[23] The demonstration of spiritual power wielded by this young woman with in this domestic space not only destabilizes fixed norms around female roles and religious authority but also works to reconfigure Lee's position within existing familial and communal structures.

Not only is Lee struggling to find a home for her own spiritual growth and sanctification, Lee is struggling to find spiritual and physical space in which she can merge the seemingly disparate parts of herself—the "naturally" lively personality, the one seeking to be infused by holy energy and supported by the community, the discerning praying woman, the critic of social mores and political structures, and, finally, the preacher. In 1809 Lee visited Richard Allen (earlier as a result of Allen's preaching and the spiritual environment of the Bethel community Lee was moved to associate with the AME Church) in his home to apprise him of her calling. Allen asks Lee "in what sphere," meaning in what denomination, does she wish to pursue this preaching ministry. When Lee replies "among the Methodists," Allen responds by saying that the Methodist Discipline does "not call for women preachers."[24] Before the AME Church adopted its own doctrine and disciplines, it was governed by the rules and Articles of Faith of the Methodist Episcopal Church. These Articles of Faith made no provision for women's ordination or licensure. Allen does suggest that there is precedent for women to offer exhortations and hold prayer meetings in local churches where the male preacher in charge provides verbal permission. Lee, was extremely apprehensive about accepting such a burdensome call, therefore, she is initially relieved by Allen's rejection. But soon, thereafter, Lee reports "that holy energy which burned within [her], as a fire, began to be smothered."[25] The contradictions regarding women's exclusion from the preaching ministry within the seemingly emancipatory space of the AME Church became clear to her particularly given the freedom of black bodies to worship in dignity and grace. Here, in the institution where she had been nurtured and had felt a

sense of community, Lee's calling—as an integral part of her very personhood—is denied not because she is black but because she is female. Although her formal request to the denominational church is initially denied, Lee continues to pursue her ministry as she feels led by God, oftentimes in ways that conform to institutional rules and structure—sometimes not.

While she felt that she had found a people with whom she could experience communion or a sense of at-home-ness (Lee said of Bethel AME "that I had come to the conclusion, that *this is the people to which my heart unites*"), exclusivist ideologies that privilege male authority still prevent the community—at least the male hierarchy—from fully accepting and supporting Lee and her new position in the body. Although Lee had already received divine confirmation of her call to preach, she also appeals to the black church community to affirm this calling. This appeal may have been intended to address both an individual and communal and necessity. Taken from "her people," her family at a young age and forced to live and work among people who did not fully value her humanity, it was crucial for Lee in her spiritual journey to find a spiritual home as well as a physical space in which she could more fully inhabit her whole self and actively live out a dynamic and vitally complex subjectivity. Her search for home is a desire for acceptance and inclusion of who she is as a whole person as well as her position and role within the community. This inclusion would also be critically important to the entire community. Women such as Lee participated in the restructuring of public and private spaces by challenging the existing norms, rules, and procedures that prevented these same places from becoming more increasingly and inclusively emancipatory contexts in which whole persons and communities are enabled to thrive.

For Jackson and Lee, community building speaks to the need these women have to find a place to call "home"—not just a spiritual home but a material home as well—and in so doing create a home for others. It also speaks to their recognized abilities as mediators of sacred power. These abilities speak to the contours of their mystical activism. Mystical activism is black women's praxis and active response in light of their mystical experience. It is their desire and willingness to access and mediate sacred power and knowledge on behalf of the community. This mediating

praxis may be both incantational and conjurational as these black women use rhetorical devices and ritual structures to effectively work to create and recreate emancipatory space. Jackson's search for home speaks to her yearning for a physical and spiritual center out of which she can exercise her gifts and fulfill her vocation. As Stephen J. Stein states, Rebecca Cox Jackson's search for space and place is a quest for a "spiritual 'family' that would integrate her religious life and her personal and social relationships into a seamless shining fabric."[26] In Jackson's vision of community women participate in leadership roles. Home is a place where black women engage in acts of decision-making and meaning making without being censured. Home is the place where the Divine Mother comforts, consoles, and protects members of the community. Failing to find sufficient support in the AME Church Jackson leaves and begins a career as an itinerant preacher.

Although as Albanese states her mystical spirituality continues to be informed by Methodist visionary conventions, Jackson eventually comes to identify the Watervliet Shaker community as her spiritual and material home. It is clear in her journal entries that she inclusively embraced whites and blacks as spiritual ancestors and co-travelers within the context of an inclusive sacred-social world. In the three book dream introduced in chapter 5, Jackson describes the guide in the vision as a white man. She also describes an instance of spirit possession relating how "a heavenly woman" came into her.[27] Jackson later identifies this woman as Mother Lucy Wright, one of the white Shaker founding members. This inclusivity was in some ways evident within the predominantly white Shaker community as well. Shaker spiritual visitations of its white members included both figures of white European ethnicity as well as blacks of African ethnicity. Jackson accrued spiritual capital within the Shaker community through the exercise of her gifts. As Stein reports, upon Jackson's visit to the Watervliet site in 1843 Shaker leaders were "impressed with her spiritual powers."[28] Although Jackson enjoyed a measure of spiritual capital within the Shaker community, she was well aware of the racial tensions and conflicts that were a part of the social fabric of the culture. As Albanese states, the Shakers were captured by abolitionist zeal and at times racist assumptions about black inferiority. Both of these realities coexisted within the Shaker worldview.[29] Although white Shakers

experienced visitations of black as well as white spiritual entities during ecstatic encounters, there were reports that suggested that some white Believers were repulsed by black visitations.[30] Therefore, while Lee experienced conflicts regarding gender within black church space, Jackson also experienced conflicts with respect to race within the Shaker community.

Although Jackson embraced the Watervliet Shaker community as "home," she felt that the Society lacked an effective plan for outreach to African Americans. She once again felt compelled to follow her inner voice that called her to minister to the needs of African Americans. When the Shaker elders refused to support this ministry, Jackson left upstate New York to work among African American communities in Philadelphia without elder approval. During this "interim" stay in Philadelphia Jackson, just as she had done in her work as a healer, further establishes her proficiency in effectively mediating sacred power in community. In 1851 when she arrived back in the Philadelphia area Jackson stayed in Camden, New Jersey, with Sister Mary Peterson and her family that consisted of Peterson's children and her sister Esther Trusty. Peterson invited Jackson to "keep up the order of your house, as if you was at home."[31] She also encouraged her to start holding Shaker meetings at Peterson's home. Jackson writes that she in fact held a Shaker meeting on "the first Sabbath." In her descriptions of the initial meetings Jackson emphasizes the significance of her role as a mediator of divine power and wisdom "unto salvation." At the first meeting a woman named Sarah Davis "was struck with the power of God." Davis exclaims that she has heard the "true Gospel" and that she wished that they could be exposed to more teachers like Jackson. At subsequent meetings many other "witnesses" testified regarding the power and exceptionality of Jackson's preaching and teaching. Jackson reports that the general consensus of attendees was that many believed "that everyone that will do as that woman says will be saved."[32] Here, Jackson establishes herself not only as an authority and effectual evangelist, minister, and community builder, but also as one who is adept at mediating sacred power such that others are drawn into the sacred-social network and space.

Both Jackson and Lee recognize the important roles women play as mediators of sacred power, healers and builders of community. In her autobiography Lee tells the story of how she went

to visit a young man who was ill. She took "two of the sisters in Christ" with her. Lee describes one of the women, Jane Hutt, as a "mother in Israel." An AME minister, Rev. Cornish, was already "labouring" with the young man in prayer when the women arrived. Lee reports that Rev. Cornish gave up and left having "received but little satisfaction." While the young man appeared indifferent in the company of Rev. Cornish, according to Lee, after the women prayed the young man seemed to become "more tender" and expressed a feeling of conviction when he invited the women to visit again.[33] As the young man was dying he sent for Lee by way of his sister. Lee once again calls on Jane Hutt to go with her. Lee and Hutt labor in prayer until the end when the young man dies with a joyful countenance. Lee writes that "his lips were clothed in a sweet and holy smile" and the room was filled with the glory of the Holy Ghost. Lee and Hutt experience rapture and ecstasy within this mystical, liminal space as the young man "entered into Paradise."[34] Lee considered women such as Jane Hutt with whom she labored in the field as being particularly adept at mediating sacred power in ways that were efficacious for all who gathered. She recognized the "worth" of women skilled in the art of prayer and often requested such women accompany her as she travelled to lead prayer services and circles, particularly in cases when individuals were ill and in need of physical healing as well as soul conversion. Lee believed that these women were skillful enough and possessed the requisite moral authority to invoke sacred power in ways that could bring about physical and spiritual changes.

Jackson relied upon Rebecca Perot as a partner in prayer and ministry. Jackson, along with Perot, would later establish a Shaker community consisting of mostly black women in Philadelphia. In 1854 Jackson and Perot participated in a spiritualist séance at the Moulson family's home. At the séance Jackson feels led to pray for Shaker "Believer spirits," to visit the assembled party. Jackson writes that after her prayer Elders Ebenezer Bishop and Ruth Landon, two deceased members of the New Lebanon family appeared. Apparently, Jackson is initially the only participant who is aware of the two spirits' presence. Moulson asks if there are any spirits present that would like to speak to any of the participants. The response is that one of the spirits wishes to speak

with Jackson. Jackson immediately identifies the spirit as Elder Ebenezer and directs the spirit to speak through Mr. Moulson. Jackson conducts the rest of the séance asking questions, and receiving answers. During the course of the séance other spirits appeared as well. Jackson's leadership not only once again reinforces her spiritual abilities and powers to access and mediate mystical space but also reinforces her idea that she should form her own "circle at home."[35]

Jackson understands this to be important work and she and Perot begin to lay the foundation "in strength and in power, in order" that Jackson can "work under God for the good of souls." Jackson sought out Believer spirits, those whom she considered as the "higher spirits." Thus, she prays "for Believer spirits to come." Jackson writes that the "power of the Spirits and the Deity" rested upon her, however, no Believer spirits came.[36] Recognizing Perot's power to effect the movement of the comings and goings, Jackson initially reprimands Perot (who also has shared some of her own visions and dreams with Jackson) when at first they did not hear from Believer spirits. Perot was praying to hear from her deceased mother who had not been a Believer. While Jackson did not object to Perot's desire in principle, she is convinced that in order to lay the proper foundation to launch the circle they needed to first seek visitations from Shaker spirits. According to Jackson, Perot is grateful for the correction.[37] Together these women participate in community building that involves a host of entities making up their sacred-social network. For these and other African American women, community building speaks to the need that black women have to create "home" not just for themselves but for others who exist within the nexus of a common past and present.

As community builders and transformative agents these women were not only concerned about physical healing and spiritual conversion from moral sins, they were also cognizant of the role black women played in converting persons from the social sins of racism, sexism, and classism. Lee describes how God by the "instrumentality of a poor coloured woman poured forth his spirit among the people." Lee lists physicians, judges, and lawyers among those on whom God "scattered fire" upon hearing her speak. As a result, persons whom the society afforded higher social status were also humbled and cried out to God for succor.

Lee describes one of these occasions. During a meeting held at her uncle's home in Cape May, New Jersey, a crowd gathered in part because they were curious to hear this "coloured" woman preacher. An old man whom Lee describes as a Deist was at this meeting. Lee describes him as an especially cruel slaveholder who did not believe that black people had souls. As the meeting began, he sat near her and attempted to intimidate her by his countenance. Lee, however, perseveres "looking to God all the while." She reports that after hearing her preach the man "believed she had the worth of souls," and now had to admit that black people must have souls. Lee states that "from this time it was said of him that he became greatly altered in his ways for the better."[38] She did not know if he was converted to Christian religious beliefs, but she thought it significant that this slaveholder had changed his thinking regarding the humanity of black people.

Sojourner Truth also demonstrates black women's ability to transform religious, social, and expand the boundaries of legal institutions and procedures via her ability to access and mediate sacred power. While she was still enslaved, but as legalized slavery is nearing an end in the state of New York, Truth seeks to access and harness spiritual power to work on her behalf and on behalf of her son Peter. Still treated as the typical antebellum transactional black body, Peter is sold multiple times as an enslaved child. In 1826 Dumont sold Peter to a Dr. Gedney. In an illegal[39] sale Gedney then sold Peter to his brother Solomon. Solomon in turn sold Peter to his brother-in-law by the surname of Fowler. Fowler was a southern planter who had married Eliza Gedney, Sally Dumont's cousin once removed. Fowler took six-year-old Peter to Alabama hundreds of miles from his mother Isabella. After she found out about the sale Isabella set out "on foot and alone" to find the man responsible for this illegal act. She confronts Sally Dumont. Although Dumont scoffs at Isabella for making such a fuss over a "little nigger" reminding her that she has no resources with which to pursue legal means to assure the return of her son, she was not to be deterred. Isabella, a determined mother, exclaims, "I have no money, but God has enough, or what's better! And I'll have my child again." Filled with divine power Isabella describes how she "felt so tall within…as if the power of a nation was with me."[40] Isabella prays not only that Peter be returned to New York but she also

prays for his freedom from slavery for she is concerned that after her fight against the illegal sale that should Peter remain in slavery to a more local owner he might be punished for her actions. With the financial help of the Poppletown Quakers and a lawyer named Demain her son is returned to her. Later upon closer inspection of her son's body Isabella sees multiple scars and contusions Peter had received at Fowler's hand. In her anger Isabella curses Fowler crying out to Jesus saying "Oh Lord, 'render unto them double' for all this!"[41] After some time Isabella got the news that Fowler had killed his wife Eliza Gedney Fowler. He had beaten her to death. Her narrative indicates that Isabella was not surprised by this turn of events (for any man who would beat a six-year-old child the way that Fowler had beaten Peter could commit other crimes as well).[42] Decades later, as Sojourner Truth, she stated that she believed that in these events "'a special providence of God was at work" and the Gedneys' pain served as "an act of 'retributive justice'" or "God's answer to her curse."[43] Like Jackson, Truth drew upon performance strategies that enabled her to access sacred power through incantation and conjuration as a means of seeking justice.

Truth recounts another episode that also speaks to black women's power to confront and challenge racialized worldviews and assumptions. Truth was participating in a Millerite camp meeting in North Hampton when "a party of wild young white men"[44] disrupted the meeting. About one hundred young men gathered at the site and threatened to set fire to the tents. Truth relates that she like so many others gathered there were afraid. She fled to a corner of the tent and hid behind a trunk. As the only black person in the meeting Truth was sure that she would bear the brunt of any violence if the situation escalated and could even be killed. As she crouched behind the trunk she describes her recognition that she "a servant of the living God" was shuddering in fear and insecurity when she possessed the power of the divine within.

Unable to convince others to come out of their hiding places, Truth walked out alone toward the mob of young men singing a hymn about Christ's resurrection. Gilbert describes Truth's performance as a fully embodied act of engagement, one in which the song could not be "separated from herself." In Truth's embodied performance delivered out "in the open air," Truth served as a mediator of mystical space and participated in the creation of a

container that encompassed the mob of men whose hearts became "susceptible" to the "good impressions" of the divine circulating within the mystical space of the disrupted camped meeting. Truth reports that the young men not only refused to attack her, but vowed to defend her against any who would attempt to molest her, as they were so eager to hear her sing and speak prophetic words. As a mediator of emancipatory mystical space, Truth engaged in prophetic acts that transformed others blinded by the clouds of misrecognition regarding the ways in which structures of domination impact and shape individual lives as well as social institutions. Later Truth joined the Northhamption Association, a cooperative religious community working to address issues such as women's rights and the abolition of slavery.[45]

In an explicit reference to slavery and race, Jackson describes her elation at the announcement of Abraham Lincoln's intent to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. Jackson had been praying continually for "the deliverance of [her] people from both spiritual and temporal bondage." She was overjoyed that she had lived to see the day.[46] Although Humez describes this as Jackson's only "overt" reference to the larger landscape of politics and race, Jackson is well aware of the problems of race within the Shaker community she called home. For example, Jackson expresses concern at the low number of blacks who could be counted as Believers within the community and long advocated for greater outreach to bring more African Americans into the Shaker fold. But she is also aware of some of the glaring (or at least the potential) differences in the treatment of black participants who might become involved in Shaker community. In her April 8, 1857, journal entry, Jackson offers what Humez refers to as a "dream-criticism"[47] of Mother Paulina Bates and the Watervliet community. In her dream Jackson returns "home" to the Watervliet compound with Rebecca Perot. Upon arriving she finds great changes have occurred—there is now a large family of African Americans and other blacks living among the Shakers. These African Americans had not yet become full members.[48] Jackson is dismayed because the African American "sisters" are not wearing the customary Shaker bonnet that women who have made a confession and are seeking full membership are entitled to wear. In her dream Jackson is met with the response that the leaders "did not think it worthwhile to put caps on them,

until they know whether they would make Believers." Jackson clearly sees this as racial discrimination, for she reports that this was not the practice when she resided at the Village. Jackson makes clear that racism is the cause for these women being treated differently. Later in the dream she also has a vision of African American sisters and brothers relegated to segregated seating at meals. The space to which they are confined is unsanitary. This is a major offense particularly given the great emphasis Shaker communities place on cleanliness. It is clear that in this dream-criticism Jackson is exposing some of the hypocrisy[49] of the Shaker community and leadership as well as communicating her concern that the Shaker community is not doing enough to meet the needs of African Americans.[50] In fact, she describes an exchange in her dream between herself and another black woman outside of the fold who expressed a good deal of bitterness toward the Shakers who had "lured her husband into the society."[51] Jackson reinforces her ability to relate to African American potential converts by describing how she, through "a gift of God to open the testimony with great power," calmed the woman and was able to converse with her.[52]

As discussed above, while Lee, Truth, and Jackson are themselves adept at facilitating the working of sacred power within eruption of mystical space, they also, in their texts take note of the power of women working together to serve as vehicles of the Spirit. Because she was still working within the institutional structures of the AME Church Lee especially focuses on women's abilities to navigate the terrain of the Spirit to transform individuals and communities where men authorized by the institutional church have failed. She also emphasizes the importance of women to mediate spiritual power in such a manner that communal transformation and reimagination of communal relationships began taking place in public and domestic spaces. This was not only true with respect to class, social status, and race, but certainly it was true when it came to gender. Lee engaged in acts of truth-telling and prophetic pronouncement regarding the ethical contradictions involved in the institutional denial of women's role as preachers within the church. Lee warned the institutional church that its exclusion of women from the preaching ministry was not only a betrayal of Jesus's ministerial and salvific vision, but a threat to the church's

ability to enable the development of whole individuals and whole relationships within community.[53] Lee is convinced that her religious experience not only endowed her with knowledge and the abilities she needed to carry out this calling, but also divine power was manifested in her ministry in such a way that valorized her calling to others.[54] Although she had not been formally recognized by the institutional church as a preacher, Lee's calling would not be denied. Once again, God's visitation among the people is rendered through a black female body. Lee exerts a will so fueled by the holy energy of God and she demonstrates such power as she exhorts the masses and led prayer meetings that, eventually, Richard Allen would be compelled to publicly affirm Lee's gifts. Allen had become Bishop of the then newly organized AME Church and gave Lee permission to lead prayer meetings. Eight years after Lee first petitioned him, Allen publicly affirmed Lee's preaching gifts after hearing her stand up and preach when the assigned minister for Bethel appeared to have "lost the spirit" to go on. Lee describes how divine power radiated through her at the service as she exhorted the crowd. Although she feared that she might be thrown out of the church for "this indecorum," this power was so great that it became evident to Allen that Lee had to be called as much as any other preacher.[55]

We see that while black women are empowered in the midst of ecstatic moments when they experience the vast expansion of God's power and are willing to expose themselves in new ways or to use their gifts in "peculiar" ways, issues of acceptance and fear of rejection still come up in their day-to-day communal lives. Even, while the institutional church affirmed Lee's preaching gifts, Lee was only *officially* allowed to serve as an itinerant preacher and was never afforded the privilege of ordination along with the accompanying financial support and access to the higher echelons of AME Church leadership. As an itinerant preacher then, Lee's gifts were at the church's disposal, however, the resources of the church offered to ordained ministers were not available to her. Yet, her role as mediator of sacred power was recognized in diverse communities and Lee was able to accrue and utilize spiritual capital throughout the course of her ministry and travels.

In carrying out her divine calling, Lee, in her extensive travels, would impact the lives of individuals transforming their way of

thinking about the humanity of black women, and her ministry facilitated the healing and conversion of many persons whom she encountered. Lee resisted and subverted the matrix of domination that would have relegated her to roles assigned to her by a patriarchal institution that denied her true identity. Overcoming fear and evil forces that had tempted her to commit suicide, Lee's transformation resulted in her radical subjectivity as a woman whose primary and ultimate authority was God. God was a source of authority and power for Lee as she defied and helped to transform the institutional church, opening the door for other women who would answer the call to preach and helping women and men to envision and worship a "whole Savior" not half of one.

By way of her mystical activism Rebecca Cox Jackson also alters the social and religious landscape of American Shakerism. In 1854 Jackson once again leaves Watervliet to establish a Shaker community in Philadelphia. Shaker protocol demanded the confirmation of an individual's "outward lead" or family leadership. While Jackson sought Eldress Paulina Bates and Elder Issacher Bates's blessings they refused to do so. Jackson's writings suggest that she believed that Paulina Bates was passing on misinformation about Jackson to Issacher Bates.[56] Shaker leaders portrayed Jackson as misled and disobedient. Jackson, however, is convinced that her charge is to establish a house in Philadelphia.[57]While in Philadelphia, Jackson continues her evangelistic and spiritualist work, speaking at churches and attending séances. Through conversing with the spirits she is again told that she has a great work to do. In a dream it is revealed to her that the Watervliet elders will have a change of heart and mind and come to embrace her vision of ministry to African Americans in Philadelphia and that they too will be convinced that Jackson is the person to do the work most effectively. In 1858 Eldress Paulina Bates did finally give Jackson "the gift" of her blessing and the offer of financial support for the new community (although Humez notes that there are no records that the Philadelphia community ever received any direct financial assistance).[58] Thus, as Jackson had already foreseen in her earlier dream the Shaker elders give their support for her work. Jackson returns to Philadelphia to establish a "permanent" and officially recognized Shaker community along with Rebecca

Perot. This community, while including black and white men and white women, consists of mostly African American women. As a founder of a Shaker family and a local leader Jackson is given the title "Mother" Jackson. In many ways she too has become "deified" and serves in a similar social and spiritual capacity as her own spirit guide to the Philadelphia community. She too has become the "Mother" who teaches, leads, guides, and protects.

The theme of travel was particularly relevant to Sojourner Truth's work as in her very name we understand that she is not wedded to a particular institutional structure. Rather, she is a mobile activist operating within what Nell Irvin Painter refers to as antislavery and feminist networks. Painter describes her as an evangelist and preacher who travelled the circuit of antislavery and women's rights meetings and conferences.[59] One of the most well-known of these meetings was the Ohio Women's Rights Convention held in Akron, Ohio, in 1851. Truth was one of several speakers present.[60] Convention secretary Marius Robinson describes Truth's embodied performance of her convention speech as "powerful" and "whole-souled." He stated that she used "earnest gestures" and spoke in "strong and truthful tones"[61]—terms that, according to Painter, were often used to describe Truth's speeches. Using strategies of call and response, humor, and sarcasm Truth embarks on a gender analysis of work, intellect, and aural-based biblical interpretations. As Painter indicates, at times Truth employs ideas of sexual difference to make her points, but her overall message speaks to a shared vision of a changing landscape in which increased gender and racial equality are on the horizon.

> Why children, if you have women's rights give it to her and you will feel better.... But the women are coming up blessed by God and a few of the men are coming up with them. But man is in a tight place, the poor slave is on him, woman is coming on him and he is surely between a hawk and a buzzard."[62]

While, as Painter acknowledges, Truth rejects a notion of social change as a "zero-sum game," Truth does recognize the moral and ideological challenge that a new community ethic of freedom and equality presents to privileged white men who view greater inclusivity of women and African Americans within the political,

social, religious, and economic structures of society as a threat to white male position and power.

As we have seen in the stories of Lee, Truth, and Jackson mystical experiences, particularly those of an ecstatic nature have opened up the resources of their sacred-social worlds to these women in ways that have provided self-knowledge and knowledge of the material reality within which they lived. These encounters also enabled them to experience true intimacy with the divine. Consequently, these women were transformed. In this transformation they experienced an expansion of the self that gave them a strong sense of confidence and determination to follow God's will. Through mystical engagement they were equipped with necessary gifts and abilities that would give them the power and authority to pursue their vocations and work to create just communities in the world. The power afforded these women in these moments of expansion as participant-witnesses not only impacted the spiritual template of the universe but could also affect the physical world.

Within the liminal space of their mystical experiences women such as Lee, Truth, and Jackson gain a different vantage point, as "mistresses of liminality" through which the interplay between subjective and institutional or social fields yield new tensions and assertions. Thus, these women not only carved personal lives of interior and public freedom, they also challenged, confronted, and participated in the recreation of community as mediators of sacred power. As Frohlich suggests African American female mystical transformation not only increases one's ability to act as Subject but also increases one's capacity to participate fully in community.

> Genuine mystical transformation is also an increasing fulfillment of the subject's self-mediation as an existential subject in community. In plainer language: mystical transformation increases both autonomy . . . and communality.[63]

With the assertion of divine call as a counterclaim to the assumed authority of institutional hierarchies, discipline, and rules, these women challenged institutional authorities and the laity to consider and reconsider communal relationships and institutional barriers to more humane ways of relating to one another. As mediators of sacred power these women act as performing

Subjects who confront prescribed racial, gender, and familial roles in ways that challenge the ethical consistency and communal congruency of sexist, racist, and hierarchal ideologies. The mystical experiences of these women did not cause them to resign themselves to a mystical life of seclusion, rather it motivated, inspired, and empowered them to seek out and work within community and participate in bringing about a more just vision of local communities within world.

Notes

Introduction

1. Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961), 4.
2. See Anthony B. Pinn, *What Is African American Religion?* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).
3. Joy R. Bostic, "Teaching African American Mysticism," in *Teaching Mysticism*, ed. William Parsons, AAR Teaching Religious Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 138.
4. Alton B. Pollard, *Mysticism and Social Change* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 2.
5. Ibid., 1.
6. Ibid., 124.
7. Ibid.
8. Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), ix.
9. Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 13.
10. Ibid., 2.
11. Ibid., 16–17.
12. Yvonne Chireau, "The Uses of the Supernatural: Toward a History of Black Women's Magical Practices," in *A Mighty Baptism: Race and Gender, in the Creation of American Protestantism*, ed. Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 172.
13. Chireau, *Black Magic*, 32.
14. Ibid., 55. Chireau draws upon slave testimonies such as one given by Harriett Collins who reported that her mother taught her healing techniques she had "larnt from old fokes from Africy, and some de Indians larnt her" from James Mellon, ed., *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember: An Oral History*, Reprint (New York: Grove Press, 2002), 94.

15. At the 2009 Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Montreal, Quebec, Rachel Harding used this term to refer to the special gifts and abilities exercised by female Candomblé practitioners in Brazil.
16. For example, itinerant preacher Elizabeth was accused of being an enthusiast. See Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 132.
17. Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (2003): 277.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 278.
20. Ibid., 279.
21. Ibid., 280.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 280–281.
24. Ibid., 282.
25. Ibid., 276.
26. Beldon C. Lane, "Spider as Metaphor: Attending to the Symbol-Making Process in the Academic Discipline of Spirituality," in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 113.
27. Lane, "Spider as Metaphor."
28. Diana L. Hayes, *Forged in the Fiery Furnace: African American Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 2–3.
29. Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 22.
30. Ibid.
31. I am familiar with the critique that certain black women such as Lee and Truth are overly referred to in scholarly discourses. Given their importance within American religious culture, however, I contend there remains *too little* scholarship on these women, particularly as compared to the extensive scholarship currently available on male religious icons both black and white.
32. Moreover, the narratives of two of these women, Jarena Lee and Sojourner Truth, are well known within African American and American communities. In fact, there are many organizations and institutions named after these women within African American communities. Thus, these individuals and aspects of the narratives are a part of the cultural imagination. It is my hope that a deeper study of these women's works will better enrich our assessment of their cultural contributions. Jackson's story, which we have not studied as much, is steeply entrenched in North American mysticism and supernaturalism and, therefore, can yield an abundance of information on black female mystic culture. In her book

Witnessing and Testifying, Rosetta Ross makes the case for the importance of women such as Sojourner Truth in understanding black women's religious activism.

33. Charles H. Long, "Indigenous People, Materialities, and Religion: Outline for a New Orientation to Religious Meaning," in *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion and the Work of Charles H. Long*, ed. Jennifer I. M. Reid (Oxford, UK: Lexington Books, 2003), 176.
34. Lane, "Spider as Metaphor," 111.
35. By theological I mean my study explores how the Subjects of the project understand and relate to sacred power. This way of doing theology is not rooted in a normative Christian notion of theology. I draw my definition from David L. Weaver-Zercher. See, "Theologies" in *Themes in Religion and American Culture*, ed. Philip Goff and Paul Harvey (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).
36. Long, "Indigenous People," 176.

1 African American Female Mysticism: The Nineteenth-Century Contextual Landscape

1. Joanne Braxton and Andree Nicola McLaughlin, eds., *Wild Women in the Whirlwind: Afra-American Culture and the Contemporary Literary Renaissance* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989).
2. Joy R. Bostic, "Mystical Experience, Radical Subjectification, and Activism in the Religious Traditions of African American Women," in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. J. K. Ruffing (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 143.
3. Ibid.
4. "Other" refers to defining or viewing another as unrelated to one's own understanding of the self. It is based on a dualistic, hierarchal view of creation. Those considered as "other" are devalued and considered subordinate.
5. Angela Davis provides one of the earliest historical explorations of gender, race, and notions of womanhood in her book *Women, Race and Class*. Deborah Gray White also contributed her look at female slavery in the South in *Ar'n't I a Woman?*. Paula Giddings in her monumental *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* provides a fine analysis of the intersecting worlds of the cult of true womanhood that established a Victorian notion of virtuous white womanhood juxtaposed to the stereotypical notions of black womanhood. Writing in the 90s Patricia Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* provides additional analysis of what she calls controlling images and stereotypes of Jezebel and Mammy that helped to justify slavery and

rape and the exploitation of black women's labor. In her book *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, womanist ethicist Emilie Townes analyzes these stereotypes and controlling images as cultural productions of systemic evil.

6. Earl Lewis, "To Turn as on a Pivot: Writing African Americans into a History of Overlapping Diasporas," in *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*, eds. Darlene Clark Hines and Jaqueline McLeod (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 19.
7. Throughout the book I use a lower case "o" for the word "object"(unless including a source that uses the word to refer to God, then it is capitalized) to express the marginalized, objectified status of those who are defined by those who are privileged. I capitalize the word "Subject" to denote one who is at the center of the theological, social, and/or cultural discourse (although not exclusively, for there can be many Subjects occupying the center position of any discourse or dialogue) and exercises the power to name, to define, and to act as an autonomous entity.
8. Carmel Bendon Davis, *Mysticism and Space: Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle, the Cloud of Unknowing Author, and Julian of Norwich* (Washington DC: CUA Press, 2008).
9. William E. Deal, "Simulating Pure Land Space : The Hyperreality of a Japanese Buddhist Paradise," in *Constructions of Space II: The Biblical City and Other Imagined Spaces,* ed. Jon L. Berquist (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 171. Here Deal quotes Jim Flanagan, "The Trialectics of Biblical Studies" (paper presented at the Constructions of Ancient Space Seminar, 2001).
10. See Joan Martin *More than Chains and Toil a Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 83.
11. Rachel E. Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), xvi.
12. Ibid., xvii.
13. Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (Oakville, CT: Equinox Pub., 2007).
14. Charles H. Long, "Indigenous People, Materialities, and Religion: Outline for a New Orientation to Religious Meaning," in *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion and the Work of Charles H. Long*, ed. Jennifer I. M. Reid (Oxford, UK: Lexington Books, 2003), 176.
15. Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 44.
16. Bradford Verter, "Spiritual Capital: Theorizing Religion with Bourdieu against Bourdieu," *Sociological Theory* 21, no. 2 (June 1, 2003): 159.

17. Ibid.
18. Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 77.
19. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology. Vol. 16. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
20. Davis, *Mysticism and Space*, 62.
21. Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 50. Here Rey is quoting Rogers Brubaker's "Rethinking Classical Theory: The Sociological Vision of Pierre Bourdieu," in *Theory and Society* 14 (1985): 745–775.
22. Verter, "Spiritual Capital," 156.
23. Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 50.
24. Verter, "Spiritual Capital," 158.
25. Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 39.
26. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 191.
27. Ibid., 190.
28. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 241.
29. Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 28–29.
30. Joy R. Bostic, "'Flesh That Dances': A Theology of Sexuality and the Spirit in Toni Morrison's Beloved," in *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*, ed. Margaret D. Kamitsuka (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 281.
31. Dianne M. Stewart provides an in-depth analysis of attempts to demonize and debase African classical religions in the Caribbean, particularly in Jamaica. See her *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
32. Verter, "Spiritual Capital," 159.
33. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
34. Ibid., 68.
35. Ibid., 69.
36. Ibid., 70.
37. Ibid., 69.
38. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 229.
39. Ibid., 237.
40. Martin, *More than Chains*, 42. Other scholars such as M. Shawn Copeland and Terry Rey have utilized Bourdieu's theory and concepts in their writings on African American and African-derived religions in order to analyze how structures of domination and the power relationships within the various fields impact black lives within North American and Caribbean milieus. All three scholars identify the strengths and limitations of Pierre Bourdieu's theory as applied to African American

religious traditions and history; however, Martin's application is particularly instructive as she specifically analyzes the working lives of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century enslaved black women. In this book, I am analyzing the published spiritual autobiographies of nineteenth-century African American women. Therefore, I am addressing experiences that were not so hidden. Not only were many of the experiences black women wrote about in their texts part of public ritual and worship spaces, but the text themselves were part of the public discourse as published documents.

41. Ibid.
42. Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion*, 121.
43. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 78.
44. Ibid., 82–83.
45. Ibid.
46. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, xiii. Although Stewart engages in this "uncovering" with respect to the experiences of blacks in Jamaica, I would argue that her attention to these dialectical relationships is also relevant within the broader context of the Americas.
47. Verter, "Spiritual Capital," 159.
48. Verter, "Spiritual Capital."
49. Ibid., 158.
50. See Jualynne Dodson, *Sacred Spaces and Religious Traditions in Oriente Cuba,* p 69. In this text Dodson also utilizes Verter's category as a way of analyzing material items used in Cuban religious practices.
51. Verter, "Spiritual Capital."
52. Ibid., 157.
53. Ibid., 156.
54. Louis Benjamin Rolsky, "Charles H. Long and the Re-Orientation of American Religious History," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 760.
55. Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*, 155.
56. Ibid., 156–157.
57. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).
58. Ibid.
59. Heretofore, it was deemed appropriate for single women to work in factory jobs prior to leaving their parents' homes to take husbands. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*.
60. Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Revised ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 46–47.
61. Renee K. Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 212–219. Here, Harrison emphasizes the importance of literacy and education for the empowerment of enslaved and free women. She also provides a

list of black women's writings published in the United States during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

62. Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 22. Here she is quoting C. E. E. Bigsby.
63. Clarice Martin, "Biblical Theodicy and Black Women's Spiritual Autobiography," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, ed. by Emilie Townes, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 17.
64. Stephen Butterfield, *Black Autobiography in America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1974), 2–3.
65. Joanne M. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography: A Tradition Within a Tradition*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 39.
66. See M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).
67. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography*, 50. In this book Braxton establishes this literary genre.
68. Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 13.
69. Here, I use David L. Weaver-Zercher's notion of theology as the way persons understand and relate to sacred power. This definition allows for a more inclusive discourse on how diverse individuals and groups think and talk about religious experience. It also overcomes the limitations of a traditional Western Christian equation of sacred power with a sole (often masculine) deity.
70. Braxton, *Black Women Writing Autobiography,* 39.
71. Katherine Clay Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.
72. Thomas Hoyt, "Testimony," in *Practicing Faith*, ed. Dorothy Bass (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997), 102.
73. Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations*, 4.
74. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1995), 131–132. Here, Turner states, "Essentially, communitas is a relationship between concrete, historical, idiosyncratic individuals. These individuals are not segmentalized into roles and statuses but confront one another rather in the manner of Martin Buber's 'I and Thou.'"
75. Sue Houchins, "Introduction," in *Spiritual Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxix-xliv.
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., xxxv.
78. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 95.
79. E. Elochukwu Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship; An African Orientation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 10.

80. William Harmless, *Mystics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 236.
81. Martin, *More than Chains*, 42.
82. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, *Exorcizing Evil: A Womanist Perspective on the Spirituals* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 116.
83. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey,* xv.
84. I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion: An Anthropological Study of Spirit Possession and Shamanism* (New York: Routledge, 1989).
85. Janice Boddy, "Spirit Possession Revisited: Beyond Instrumentality" in *Annual Review of Anthropology Annual Review of Anthropology*, Vol. 23, (1994), 427.
86. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. Updated (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 64.
87. Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 102.
88. Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 7.

2 Defining Mysticism and the Sacred-Social Worlds of African American Women

1. For example, Evelyn Underhill continued to make references to "abnormal" ecstatic phenomena.
2. In recent history, however, more attention has been given to the inclusion of these women within Christian mystical traditions. See Sue Houchins, "Introduction," in *Spiritual Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Joy R. Bostic, "Mystical Experience, Radical Subjectification, and Activism in the Religious Traditions of African American Women," in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. Janet K. Ruffing (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001).
3. At a panel on mysticism that took place as a part of the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion several years ago, I was asked to offer a psychological explanation for the knowledge claims of nineteenth-century African American women. The questioner assumed that the experiences these women described could be reduced to some sort of pathology.
4. We see evidence of this historical demonization of black religion by Western cultures even in recent times with the characterizations of Haiti by Pat Robertson and French prime minister Nicolas Sarkozy following an earthquake that devastated the country in January 2010. Both described the country as being "cursed."
5. In this book I am not attempting to argue that the selected women are practicing mystics. Rather, I am working to make clear the mystical dimensions of their religious experiences.

6. Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* (London, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 24. See also Leigh Eric Schmidt, "The Making of Modern 'Mysticism.'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71, no. 2 (2003): 275.
7. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, xv.
8. Ibid., 56.
9. Ibid.
10. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of Christian Mystical Traditions from Plato to Denys* (New York: Oxford University Press, London: Clarendon Press, 1981), 5.
11. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 33.
12. Ibid., 34–35. McGinn dates Plato's immediate school from 350–100 BCE, Middle Platonism from 100 BCE to 250 CE and Neoplatonism from 250 CE onward.
13. Louth, *The Origins of Christian Mystical Traditions,* 18.
14. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 42.
15. Ibid., 12.
16. Bouyer, "Mysticism: An Essay on the History of the Word," in *Understanding Mysticism,* ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1980), 50.
17. Louth, *The Origins of Christian Mystical Traditions,* 52. It was Origen's teacher Clement who first adapted language from the mystery cults to articulate the spiritual life of the Christian devotee.
18. Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 149–150. McGinn states that "the journey motive, the conception of life as a passage through a series of stages on the way to an intended goal, is deeply rooted in the human mind. The notion of being on an itinerary . . . allows us to give structure and meaning to . . . life. Many mystics, both in Christianity and in other religious traditions, have used itineraries to describe what they experienced and what they wish to hand on to their followers . . . Progression in terms of three stages—a beginning, an intermediary, and a concluding one—is perhaps the most natural form of itinerary."
19. See, for example, McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism*.
20. Bernard McGinn uses this approach in his voluminous study of Western Christian mysticism.
21. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, xvi, 131–134.
22. Ibid., 132–133.
23. While some of her works were investigated by the Inquisition and even deemed heretical, Teresa of Avila's reputation was redeemed and she was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church.
24. According to McGinn, the focus on union as the goal of contemplation did not occur until the twelfth century. See McGinn, "Love, Knowledge

and *Unio mystica* in the Western Christian Tradition" in *Mystical Union Judaism, Christianity and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: Continuum, 1996).

25. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 80.
26. See, for example, the conflict between Luther, who emphasized the centrality of God's word and scripture as a basis for revelation, and Thomas Müntzer, who emphasized revelation based on personal experience and affirmed visions. See Williston Walker, et. al., *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner, 1985).
27. See Richard Woods, *Understanding Mysticism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Image Books, 1980).
28. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 309, note 10.
29. Ibid.
30. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York: Mentor, 1958), 318.
31. Ibid., 319–320.
32. Underhill, "The Essentials of Mysticism", in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. Richard Woods (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1980), 27.
33. Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993), 81.
34. Ibid., 79.
35. Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 23–24.
36. Ibid., 25.
37. Ibid., 30. Katz refers to this approach as a "two directional symmetry."
38. Ibid., 41.
39. Stephen Katz, *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University, 1983), 43.
40. Ibid., 57.
41. Jess Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2007).
42. See McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*.
43. Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961), 4.
44. Ibid.
45. Howard Thurman, "Mysticism and Social Change," *Eden Seminary Bulletin* 4 (Spring 1939): 27–29.
46. Alton B. Pollard, III, "African American Mysticism," in *African American Religious Cultures Volume 1*, ed. Anthony B. Pinn (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009), 4.
47. See also, Joy R. Bostic, "Teaching African American Mysticism," in *Teaching Mysticism*, ed. William Parsons, AAR Teaching Religious Studies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 140.

48. Barbara A. Holmes, *Joy Unspeakable: Contemplative Practices of the Black Church* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2004), 25.
49. Bostic, "Teaching African American Mysticism," 141.
50. Kofi Opuku, "African Mysticism," in *Mysticism and the Mystical Experience*, ed. Donald H. Bishop (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1995), 326.
51. Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 239.
52. Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 29.
53. Evan M. Zeusse, "Perseverance and Transmutation in Traditional Religion," in *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* ed. Jacob K. Olupona (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1991), 177.
54. This includes the Supreme Being, the Orisha, and the ancestors.
55. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, Updated (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11.
56. Ibid., 32.
57. Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples* (Fortress Press, 1994), 106. Paris adopts the term "personality-soul" to refer to a complex understanding of an individual person.
58. Jacob K. Olupona, "Major Issues in the Study of African Traditional Religions," *in African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1991), 177.
59. John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969),176–177.
60. E. Elochukwu Uzukwu, *Worship as Body Language: Introduction to Christian Worship; An African Orientation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), 10.
61. Carmel Bendon Davis, *Mysticism and Space: Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle, The Cloud of Unknowing Author, and Julian of Norwich* (Washington DC: CUA Press, 2008), 5.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid., 5–6.
64. Ibid., 7. Davis employs the literary notion of mise en abîme to incorporate "spatial ideas represented in textual form."
65. Ibid., 79.
66. Ibid., 80.
67. Ibid., 65.
68. Ibid.
69. Rachel E. Harding, *A Refuge in Thunder: Candomblé and Alternative Spaces of Blackness* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), xvi.

70. Ibid.
71. Katherine Clay Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 3.

3 Standing upon the Precipice: Community, Evil, and Black Female Subjectivity

1. Joy R. Bostic, "Mystical Experience, Radical Subjectification, and Activism in the Religious Traditions of African American Women," in *Mysticism and Social Transformation*, ed. J. K. Ruffing (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 145.
2. Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future After Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).
3. Maria W. Stewart et al., *Spiritual Narratives*, The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 18.
4. Ibid.
5. Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), 599. See note 35.
6. Gwyn Campbell, "Children and Slavery in the New World: A Review," *Slavery & Abolition* 27, no. 2 (August 2006): 270.
7. Ibid., 275.
8. Ibid.
9. Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 126.
10. Ibid., 128.
11. Ibid.
12. William L. Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, Religion in North America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 27–28.
13. Ibid., 27.
14. Ibid., 167.
15. Stewart et al., *Spiritual Narratives*, 11–12.
16. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 27.
17. Ibid,. 143
18. Renee K. Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 142.
19. Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 94.

20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 95.
22. Anne Rebecca Elliott, African *American Women's Understandings of the Spirit: Ancient Eastern Pneumatological Influences* (New York, NY: Union Theological Seminary, 1998), 237.
23. Ibid., 241.
24. Alison Weber explores the ways in which Teresa of Avila uses language and literary conventions in her writings as "conscious rhetorical devices." See Alison Weber, *Teresa of Avila and the Rhetoric of Feminity* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 1990), 3–4.
25. James Craig Holte, *The Conversion Experience in America: A Sourcebook on Religious Conversion Autobiography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992). xi.
26. Ibid., xii.
27. Mathieu Deflem, "Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner's Processual Symbolic Analysis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, no. 1 (March 1, 1991): 8.
28. Ibid., 9.
29. Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*, Updated (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 74.
30. Ibid., 73.
31. Holte, *The Conversion Experience in America*, 22.
32. George White, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White*, 1st Palgrave ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2002).
33. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 29.
34. Ibid., 27.
35. Ibid.
36. Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Modern Library, 2006).
37. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 30.
38. Finnian N. Nwaozor, *Studies in African and Medieval European Mysticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, May 2002). Nwaozor discusses the prevalence and role of mystical flight in African mysticisms. He also describes the significance of symbols of death and rebirth in African mystical traditions.
39. Loewenberg and Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century*, 129.
40. Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1969), 63.
41. See chapter 2.
42. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 93–94.
43. Charles H. Long, "Indigenous People, Materialities, and Religion: Outline for a New Orientation to Religious Meaning," in *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion and the Work of*

Charles H. Long, ed. Jennifer I. M. Reid (Oxford, UK: Lexington Books, 2003), 180.
44. Ibid., 168–170.
45. Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 43.
46. Ibid., 41.
47. White, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel*, 98.
48. Loewenberg and Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century*, 129. Instead of a spider's thread or web, Elizabeth identifies a silver *hair* as indicative of sinful humanity's fragile condition.
49. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1983).
50. Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003). As a container the hand is not fixed or rigid in its use or contents. It may be enhanced or recharged by adding new materials and making new configurations.
51. Ibid., 137.
52. Sue Houchins, "Introduction," in *Spiritual Narratives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), xxxvii.
53. Stewart et al., *Spiritual Narratives*, xxxvii.
54. Ibid., 71.
55. Joy R. Bostic, "'Flesh That Dances': A Theology of Sexuality and the Spirit in Toni Morrison's Beloved," in *The Embrace of Eros: Bodies, Desires, and Sexuality in Christianity*, ed. Margaret D. Kamitsuka (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 280.
56. Jean McMahon Humez, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, Illustrated ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 72.
57. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 29.
58. Quoted in Diana L. Hayes, *Forged in the Fiery Furnace: African American Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 161.
59. Riggins R. Earl, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 58.
60. See Frohlich *The Intersubjectivity of the Mystic*.
61. This treatment of the erotic in women's mystical experience goes beyond the tendency to reduce the presence of the erotic in mystical visions as merely a response to problems of sexual sublimation.
62. Turner referred to persons who mediate the liminal space between the material and spiritual worlds as "threshold people."
63. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit,* 34.
64. McGinn, *The Essential Writings*, 395.
65. Elliott, *African American Women's Understandings*, 93.

66. Quoted in Bostic, "Mystical Experience," 153.
67. Withdrawal here is distinguished from avoidance.

4 God I Didn't Know You Were So Big: Apophatic Mysticism and Expanding Worldviews

1. Sojourner Truth and Margaret Washington, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 4–5.
2. Ibid., 7.
3. Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).
4. Delores Williams discusses the womanist concept of survival in her book *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995).
5. Disobedient or problematic slaves would be more readily sold off and separated from their families.
6. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 16.
7. Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 11. Here, Morrison is referring specifically to slave narratives but this argument would apply to nineteenth-century spiritual autobiographies as well.
8. See William L. Andrews, "The Changing Moral Discourse of Nineteenth-Century African American Women's Autobiography: Harriet Jacobs and Elizabeth Keckley," in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 229.
9. Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 54.
10. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (Glenview, IL: Basic Books, 1992), 33.
11. Ibid., 15.
12. Terry Rey, *Bourdieu on Religion: Imposing Faith and Legitimacy* (Oakville, CT: Equinox, 2007), 39.
13. Truth provides an interesting case to explore the ways in which black women have sacrificed their bodies under pressure from the tools of the demonarchal matrix but through their Subjectivity have reclaimed control over their bodies and used them to assert black female power and undermine white, male power (for example, baring her breasts in response to a white male's attempts to defeminize her as means of invalidating her participation in the feminist/abolitionist movement).
14. I use "himself" here to indicate that the masculine pronoun within this context was in no way neutral but the god of a patriarchal culture was/is wholly identified with the masculine gender.

15. George White, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel: The Narratives of John Jea and George White*, 1st Palgrave ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 90.
16. See, "Colonization" entry in *Dictionary of Feminist Theologies*, eds. J. Shannon Clarkson and Letty M. Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).
17. Ibid.
18. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness,* 241–242, note 3.
19. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 234.
20. Truth and Washington, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 20–21.
21. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 227.
22. Bert James Loewenberg and Ruth Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 128.
23. Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves*, 2nd ed. (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1969), 93–94.
24. Truth and Washington, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 45.
25. Finnian N. Nwaozor, *Studies in African and Medieval European Mysticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska-Lincoln, May 2002), 53–54.
26. Charles H. Long, "Indigenous People, Materialities, and Religion: Outline for a New Orientation to Religious Meaning," in *Religion and Global Culture: New Terrain in the Study of Religion and the Work of Charles H. Long*, ed. Jennifer I. M. Reid (Oxford, UK: Lexington Books, 2003), 168.
27. Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 130–131.
28. Truth and Washington, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 44.
29. Bernard McGinn, *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Modern Library, 2006), 280.
30. Beverly Lanzetta, *Radical Wisdom: A Feminist Mystical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 14.
31. Ibid., 15.
32. Ibid., 23.
33. White, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel*, 21.
34. Ibid., 20.
35. Ibid.
36. Paggett, "A Symbolic Narrative Seen Through the African Burial Ground," *Newsletter of the African Burial Ground and Five Points Archeological Projects*, Vol. 2, No. 8 Fall, 1988, 9.
37. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 28. This celebration marked a validation and sharing of African cultural knowledge.

38. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
39. Ibid.
40. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 27.
41. Ibid.
42. White, *Black Itinerants of the Gospel*, 101.
43. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 27.
44. Ibid., 298. See note 10.
45. Truth and Washington, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*.
46. Ibid., 49–50.
47. Decolonization for Truth as well as for other black women can be viewed in light of the biblical notion of metanoia as a complete turning of the whole self.
48. Truth and Washington, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 50–51.
49. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 73.
50. Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 18.
51. While Truth takes on an autonomous sense of identity and self, there are times when she slips back into relationships that parrot the hierarchy and abuse she previously suffered especially during her time with the Millerites.

5 Look at What You Have Done: Sacred Power and Reimagining the Divine

1. Rebbeca Jackson, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress*, Illustrated ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 72.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 78.
5. Katherine Clay Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations: Culture, Gender, and Community in Early African American Women's Writing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 22.
6. Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 1983), 85.
7. Bassard, *Spiritual Interrogations*.
8. Ibid., 124.
9. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 75.
10. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 96.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 98.
13. Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, 74.

14. Ibid.
15. Jackson, *Gifts of Power,* 98.
16. Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
17. Ibid., 31.
18. Ibid., 35. Styers reports that natural philosophers were experimenting with natural magic. Styers argues that these philosophers "downplayed the role of demonic agency."
19. Ibid., 36.
20. Ibid. Here, Styers is quoting Stuart Clark.
21. Yvonne Patricia Chireau, "The Uses of the Supernatural: Toward a History of Black Women's Magical Practices," in *A Mighty Baptism: Race and Gender, in the Creation of American Protestantism*, ed. Susan Juster and Lisa MacFarlane (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 171.
22. Yvonne Patricia Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 172. Theophus Smith argues that magic remained an important technology even in Puritan America. He contends that the construction and perpetuation of an "unambiguous representation" of a "Puritan American worldview founded by God's Manifest Destiny" constitutes a magical performance. Smith adds that African Americans and Native Americans recognized this as a conjured notion. See Smith, *Conjuring Culture Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press), 70–76.
23. In her journal Jackson describes a dream in which an old woman tries to kill her siblings. Jackson identifies the woman as a witch. Therefore, while Jackson believes that God approves of her use of conjurational powers she still may harbor some bifurcated views of holiness and particular forms of magic.
24. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 98.
25. One might also argue that this may be a case in which Jackson uses conventional rhetoric to "sacralize" her powers and distinguish them from so-called magic associated with the demonic.
26. Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 21.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid., 239.
29. Ibid., 240.
30. See, for example, Will Coleman's "Coming through 'Ligion,'" in Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives,* 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); and "Ghosts

and Conjurers" in James Mellon, ed., *Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember: An Oral History*, Reprint (New York: Grove Press, 2002), 83–100.

31. Yvonne Chireau, "The Uses of the Supernatural," 171.
32. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit*, 85–86.
33. Ibid., 87.
34. John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400–1800* (New York; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 235.
35. Ibid., 236.
36. Dianne Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*: *African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), xv.
37. In her journal she writes that she was guided around the room by a white man who had a "father and a brother's countenance . . . in his face." Humez explains that Jackson's description "is a conventional Shaker expression for referring to elders respectfully." See Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 147.
38. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 146.
39. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 165.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 180–181.
42. Ibid., 196.
43. Ibid.
44. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 204.
45. Ibid., 162.
46. Ibid., 290–291.
47. See Susan Hekman's chapter "Subject/Object" in *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990).
48. Ibid.
49. William Wainwright, *Mysticism: A Study of its Nature, Cognitive Value and Moral Implications* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), xiii.
50. Ibid.
51. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Mentor, 1958), 352.
52. See, for example, Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
53. Howard Thurman, *Mysticism and the Experience of Love* (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961), 10.
54. Ibid., 8.

55. William Ernest Hocking, "The Mystical Spirit and Protestantism," in *Understanding Mysticism*, ed. R. Woods (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1980), 20.
56. Ibid.
57. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 147.
58. See Dorothee Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).
59. See Renee Harrison's discussion of literacy, education, and power, in *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 212–220.
60. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 108.
61. Elizabeth Abbott, *A History of Celibacy* (New York: Scribner, 2000), p 19.
62. Hyun Kyung Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 77.
63. Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*.
64. Abbott states that this was the fate of half of all Manchester children.
65. Abbott, *A History of Celibacy*, 149.
66. Ibid. Abbott argues that Ann Lee's experiences of marriage, sex, and the loss of her children made her obsessive about her rejection of sex and demands for celibacy within the American Shaker community.
67. Abbott, *A History of Celibacy,* 17.
68. For enslaved black men this was a difficult assertion given that the law did not recognize the marriages of slave women and men.
69. Paula J. Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 2007), 60.
70. Deborah Gray White, *Aren't I a Woman?: Female Slaves in the Plantation South*, Revised ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 151. White includes stories of spousal abuse such as how Jim hit his wife Rachel on the head with a poker, and how Demps hit his wife Hetty and locked her in a room to keep her from going to a New Year's party on another plantation.
71. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 91.
72. Ibid. Jackson's gift of healing also parallels an attribute associated with the Yoruba deity Shango. Shango is considered to be a powerful medicine healer.
73. Jackson felt that the Shakers' beliefs were most consistent with her views. She was particularly concerned with being a part of a religious community that supported a celibate lifestyle.
74. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 174–175.
75. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 209.

6 Weaving the Spider's Web: African American Female Mystical Activism

1. Beldon C. Lane, "Spider as Metaphor: Attending to the Symbol-Making Process in the Academic Discipline of Spirituality," in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 109–110.
2. Ibid., 111. Lane also describes Edwards's use of the spider's web metaphor as conveying "the intensity, and grimness of the whole revivalist tradition."
3. Raymond J. DeMallie, *North American Indian Anthropology: Essays on Society and Culture* (VNR AG, 1994), 356.
4. Ibid.
5. In this chapter I use different spellings to denote different characteristics of the spider deity/cultural hero/trickster. I use "Anansi" to refer to the West African deity or cultural hero, "Ananse" to indicate the "villainous trickster," and "Anancy" to identify the North American/Caribbean figure who serves as cultural hero or healer and who, within the United States is transformed into "Aunt Nancy."
6. Linda Goss and Marion Barnes, *Talk That Talk: An Anthology of African American Storytelling* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), 35.
7. Shanna Greene Benjamin, "Weaving the Web of Reintegration: Locating Aunt Nancy in Praisesong for the Widow," *MELUS* 30, no. 1 (April 1, 2005): 55.
8. Ibid.
9. Renee K. Harrison, *Enslaved Women and the Art of Resistance in Antebellum America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 21–22.
10. Ibid., 22.
11. Ibid., 23.
12. Ibid., 24.
13. Gay Wilentz, *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Disease* (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 37.
14. Benjamin, "Weaving the Web of Reintegration," 51.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. William L. Andrews, ed., *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, Religion in North America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 28.
18. Ibid., 29.

19. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 95.
20. Ibid.
21. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 35.
22. Ibid.
23. Mary Frohlich, *The Intersubjectivity of the Mystic: A Study of Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 340.
24. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 36.
25. Ibid.
26. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 209.
27. Jackson, *Gifts of Power: The Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress,* Illustrated ed. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), 133.
28. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, 192.
29. Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 241.
30. Ibid., 240–241.
31. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 231.
32. Ibid.
33. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 43.
34. Ibid., 44.
35. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 241.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*, 146–147.
39. Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 32–33. In New York it was illegal to sell enslaved persons to states that would legally continue to enslave persons after 1827. According to Painter many New York slave owners such as Gedney took advantage of the southern slavery market to profit from the illegal sale of New York enslaved persons.
40. Sojourner Truth and Margaret Washington, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 31.
41. Ibid., 39.
42. Ibid., 41.
43. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 36.
44. Truth and Washington, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, 93.
45. Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying*, 1st ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 19.

46. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 282. The Emancipation Proclamation only offered freedom to the slaves within states that had seceded from the Union and even then emancipation was dependent on Union military victories. Finally, lands already under Union control were exempted.
47. Ibid., 268. See note 35.
48. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 268.
49. Ibid., 269. See note 55.
50. Ibid., 268. See note 51.
51. Ibid., 269.
52. Ibid.
53. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit,* 36.
54. Ibid., 48.
55. Andrews, *Sisters of the Spirit*.
56. Jackson, *Gifts of Power*, 250. See note 31.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 277. See note 7.
59. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 115.
60. Painter emphasizes this in her book to correct some of the inaccuracies of other reconstructed narratives of Truth's role in the convention. See Painter's *Sojourner Truth: A Life and a Symbol* for her discussion of the ways in which the Sojourner Truth as *symbol* have obscured representations of her actual life.
61. Painter, *Sojourner Truth*, 125.
62. Ibid., 125–126.
63. Frohlich, *The Intersubjectivity of the Mystic*, 140.

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Index