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# You Can't See Me!:
# Heterodox Black Religiosities &
# The Politics of Recognition

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

You Can't See Me!:
Heterodox Black Religiosities &
The Politics of Recognition

by

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In this dissertation, I explore several key works in the fields of Black Literature and Black theology that highlight the rich and complex nature of Black religious and spiritual traditions in the U.S. I focus on studies that show how Africans and African Americans postslavery were able to mount serious resistance to white supremacist efforts to dehumanize and assimilate Black lives politically, economically, and socially by way of Western theology's claims and Protestant Christianity's influence. I term the multifarious spiritual traditions and belief systems that offered Black folks healing, and the space in which to redefine and create new meaning *heterodox Black religiosities*. I then place my inquiry of minor or heterodox Black Christianities within a larger conversation about the politics of recognition, where the desire to be seen and treated as human within a state to which the appeals for recognition are directed and from which they are denied often prove inadequate or limited as modes for liberation.

This dissertation is an effort to think through the complexities of how African American literature interacts with what I am terming the notion of *uncalling* made visible by the heterodox Christianities that fall out of the scope of the Black. In other words, I analyze Black religiosity as an enactment of radical Black collectivity in counterdistinction to a politics of recognition. I argue it is this figure of the uncalled, operating out of heterodox Black religiosities, that can offer an alternative model for liberation and healing that is not bound up in outward cries for recognition—a redirected and more productive form of protest that already exists but that is underutilized. This alternative strategy aims to shift Black protest efforts away from desiring settler-colonial, patriarchal, non-mutual state-based recognition, and toward the freedom found in wholeness and strength through internal journeys, supported by radical Black sociality after the emotional and spiritual battles are waged, in the quiet victories of peace, and with the guidance, insights, theories and writings of the Black feminist tradition.

**Keywords:** recognition; recognition-based protest; liberal politics of recognition; patriarchy; capitalism; heterodox Black religiosities; figure of the uncalled; settler-state sovereignty; freedom, protest, Black church, conjurer, Conjure, Christianity; white supremacy; justice, healing, wholeness, frequency

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## Introduction

This book will examine ways in which contemporary canonical Black Christianity has, on one hand, served as a vehicle for white supremacy while, on the other, functioned as a vehicle for radical Black sociality. Canonical Black Christianity includes popular public misperceptions of a monolithic Black church that—although made up of various denominations, factions, and theological differences—functions as a trope that creates and recreates meaning as a rhetorical construction in and through Black lives. This project will focus on how divergent, noncanonical understandings and practices of Black religiosity are manifested in contemporary African American literature, particularly through notions of "calling" and "uncalling." Although it is well documented in historical and sociological scholarship that Black Christianity has been used as a tool both for oppression and liberation, my project focuses on alternative expressions of Black religiosity in African American fiction since the early twentieth century, focusing on the proliferation of minor Black religiosities, or heterodoxies, as well as on the shades of religious expression that do not conform to institutionalized or canonical Black religion. I will utilize texts that are shaped by this tension—such as James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*—to draw out a form of being in the world that is not concerned with obtaining approval, social/political recognition, or affirmation within a white supremacist framework. I will pay particular attention to notions of calling, ordination, anointing, and uncalling that illustrate the disruptions of this master narrative of the Black church in

order to consider the relationship between Black religiosity, Black social movements, and the politics of recognition.

The term Christianity now seems inadequate to address the complexities of possibility made available in expressions of Black Christian-derived religiosity. For this reason, I use terms such as "heterodox Black religiosities" or "radical Black socialities of the 'uncalled'" to identify ways in which contemporary Black authors explore what a liberatory Christianity might look like. In each chapter I will trace the possibilities of a subversive collectivity that exists alongside and in spite of the white supremacist aims of Western Christianity.

My dissertation will argue that it is this figure of the uncalled, operating out of heterodox Black religiosities, that can offer an alternative model for liberation and healing that is not bound up in outward cries for recognition—an alternate form of protest that already exists but that is underutilized due to the immense benefits that the state gains by fanning the desire for recognition either by withholding it or by granting it on its own terms, which are singularly one sided. I define heterodox Black religiosities as the multifarious spiritual traditions and beliefs created, modified, and interpreted by Black folk since slavery to bring meaning, resistance, and healing to Black lives. This subversive collectivity exists alongside and in spite of the White supremacist aims of Western Christianity—something between magic and religion, something that troubles the distinction, something that calls attention to the mechanisms of persuasion and the politics of defining one against the other. This is also what I mean when I refer more loosely to minor Black Christianities. It is in these spaces of nonsanctioned or prescribed

spiritual traditions that radical Black socialities of the uncalled or the figure of the uncalled can be found.

I define the figure of the uncalled as a noncanonical African American spiritual practitioner in tune with the invisible realm and supernatural forces made available by heterodox Black religiosities. Operating within a radical Black sociality of subversive collectivity, this figure exercises an unusual measure of efficacy over his or her position and standing in life and possesses the ability to heal and liberate while defining and redefining white supremacist conceptions of value over his or her being. The figure of the uncalled is emblematic of Black folks who in the face of violence, dehumanization, and assimilation efforts have created new worlds and meanings that help them thrive and not just survive. I further define the figure of the uncalled as one who resists dogmatic capitalistic notions of *calling* as a way of life that is based on an economic obligation to participate in the production of the individual and in an uncritical work force for fulfillment and acceptance. The figure of the uncalled is rejected, undervalued, and denied access socially and politically to white life—not called on to participate in a relationship of mutual recognition; however, the figure of the uncalled does not register this lack of recognition by whites and the systemic global mechanisms of white supremacy as a lack of his or her own humanity, worth, or generative capability to create meaning and connections among the rest of the uncalled. Self-defining and defending, the figure of the uncalled is not a utopic figure; it is rather an undertheorized figure already existing in Black literature and social movements.

In *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition,* Yvonne Chireau argues that *conjurers,* or African American spiritual practitioners, were "gifted with enhanced insight into the invisible realm" (23), able to "manipulate unseen forces or 'work the spirits'" (21) to achieve a "conceptual measure of control and power over their circumstances" (24-5). Chireau also maintains that though Conjure is "usually associated with magical practices, unlike Christianity which is seen as a religion" (12), "the merging of African-inspired practices and Protestantism shows affinities with, as well as departures from, universally held Christian traditions" (67). She further argues that, "African American 'religion' is not always distinct from what others call 'magic.' Instead, these are complementary forms in African American culture" (Chireau, 6). In other words, "the relationship between Conjure and Christianity was fluid and constantly shifting. . . . Spiritually pragmatic, black Americans were able to move between Conjure and Christianity because both were perceived as viable systems for accessing the supernatural world, and each met needs that the other did not" (Chireau, 24-5). "Conjure is a magical tradition in which spiritual power is invoked for various purposes, such as healing, protection, and self defense" (Chireau, 12). My definition of the figure of the uncalled builds upon Chireau's work and her descriptions of the conjurer. *Black Magic* serves as one of the central theoretical texts upon which I will rely. This does not mean that conjurers (in certain moments) have failed to see themselves as *called* by God, for they were capable and comfortable with moving back and forth between different spiritual frameworks and practices. However, the notion of *calling* I am positioning these *uncalled figures* against, involves the Western Protestant connotations of calling as the

exploitation of labor through an emphasis on a proper work ethic as well as a distinctly Western, masculine, white supremacist, and toxic value system for what it means to be human and whole. The uncalled are both rejected by dominant white acceptance but are also demonstrate the freedom of being able to refuse such a refusal.

In addition to Chireau's *Black Magic,* I lean heavily on Glen Sean Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* in order to reconfigure how African American religious experiences can be viewed as a theology of rejected recognition. Coulthard argues "that instead of ushering in an era of peaceful coexistence grounded on the ideal of reciprocity or mutual recognition, the politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous people's demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend" (3). Building off the work of Richard J. F. Day, Coulthard defines the "politics of recognition" as "the now expansive range of recognition-based models of liberation pluralism that seeks to 'reconcile' Indigenous assertions of nationhood with settler-state sovereignty via the accommodation of Indigenous identity claims in some form of renewed legal and political relationship with the Canadian state" (3). Aligned with Day and Coulthard's definition, I describe the "politics of recognition" as the evolutionary tactics of white supremacist settler-state structures of domination that both oppress and exclude, as well as fan the flames for freedom and inclusion. Through perceived accommodation efforts, they begrudgingly seem to bestow recognition upon the rejected (the uncalled) on terms that in no way threaten the power relations and that have the added benefit of calming

and defusing protest. In other words, the politics of recognition operates as the nonmutual sociopolitical relationship that promises freedom while reinforcing oppression.

I argue for an alternative to recognition-based forms of protest by incorporating the spiritual and religious research of Chireau and others that further the conversation of a truly liberatory kind of protest—like Coulthard's reading of Fanon's critique of Hegel's master/slave dialectic that reveals recognition to be not a source of freedom but rather "the field of power through which colonial relations are produced and maintained" (Coulthard, 16). I look to the possibilities of radical Black sociality that exist within minor Black religiosities and through figures such as the uncalled.

My dissertation pairs theories of recognition and theology, as well as place Black protest and social movements in conversation with Black theology and noncanonical spiritual beliefs systems, in order to think about state power, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism as modalities of oppression. Moreover, I think about how protest to such oppression is allowed to be thought. It asks these two critical questions: How do "minor" Black Christianities or heterodox Black religiosities trouble an easy distinction between Black religion as a tool for oppression and Black religion as a liberatory force? What do theories and figurations of uncalling make possible for conceiving forms of radical Black sociality that operate outside the desire for social and political recognition?

My readings include various novels, poems, and short stories; nonfiction texts in literature and philosophy that attempt to wrestle with variant articulations of religiosity, protest, and recognition, particularly in African American literature and criticism; and secondary sources in religion and theology—such as Theophus H. Smith's *Conjure*

*Culture: Biblical Formations of Black American,* Jawanza Eric Clark's *Indigenous Black Theology: Towards an African-Centered Theology of the African-American Religious Experience,* Tracey E. Hucks' *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious, and* James H. Cone's *Black Theology & Black Power* and *A Black Theology of Liberation.* These texts help me build an alternative to the current liberal politics of recognition. I am interested in placing these histories of alternative community formation in conversation with the depictions of Black religiosity in contemporary African American literature in order to analyze Black religiosity from the perspective of an enactment of radical Black collectivity in counterdistinction to a politics of recognition.

My dissertation is profoundly interdisciplinary as it pulls together historical, theological, literary, popular social media, and rhetorical theory. Paying particular attention to rhetoric and rhetoricality allows me to expand the theoretical work I hope to do in terms of the epistemological instability of language—as articulated by Jennifer Richards, Frederick Nietzsche, and Kenneth Burke—with an emphasis on rhetoric as a critical method and its role in the creation of meaning. Contemporary rhetorical studies claim that all language is composed of tropes and figures. This understanding of language becomes useful to my dissertation because it allows me to approach the texts and Black religiosity or Black Christianity as a trope and to ask such questions as "for whom?" and "where?" A rhetorical analysis is necessary to add to the textures of my larger project—complementing the literary, theological, and indigenous theories and methodologies of my inquiry. By tracing the rhetorical paths of thought each author travels and by mapping the genealogy of the trope, this lens allows me to examine how

meaning is made, unmade, and remade. I analyze what such ideas tell us when placed against the literary and cultural renderings of Christianity as opiate and as retardant and neutralizing agent of white supremacy.

My dissertation looks not only at conceptions of protest and notions of recognition as they relate to minor or heterodox articulations of Black religiosity, analyzing ways in which each author attempts to address these concepts; but it also examines how current understandings of protest and recognition align with and diverge from earlier prominent formulations of Black protest and resistance, such as those of W.E.B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*, Richard Wright's *Native Son,* and Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* and *Notes of a Native Son*. Black protest continues to inhabit a highly contested space in American culture, in contemporary Black politics, and in social movements. For example, the current #blacklivesmatter movements advocate for justice, highlighting the blatant and untenable racial inequities of the criminal justice system. The #blacklivesmatter movements can be read as participating in the recognition-seeking tactics prominently present in Wright's protest novel *Native Son* that attempt to make visible the feelings of impossibility that being Black in America comprised. Bigger Thomas, for example, wanted his white lawyer to understand him; and Max's Marxist sermon in Part III of *Native* Son appeals to the court and the judge to understand Bigger—to recognize him as a human being whose life is worth saving, to acknowledge the many injustices of his reality, and to recognize the economic and political handicaps of his environment—and change. Both *Native Son* and the #blacklivesmatter movements typify, for me, the issue of protest and the desire for recognition that I hope to explore in

this special topic. However, the #blacklivesmatter movements—far from a monolith themselves—are not always concerned with recognition; they reject out of hand a world in which Black death is a necessity for white life. Rather than being an address, the name #blacklivesmatter is a refusal. In this sense, #blacklivesmatter movements and my special topic both have in common a radical stake in Black life. I am interested in the relationship between Black religiosity and Black movements and the state's ability to withhold recognition, and how fictional explorations of the uncalled offer alternatives to that power binary.

My dissertation—pulling from so many familiar strands—is in conversation with and borrowing from Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* W.E.B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk*, Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask,* Hazel V. Carby's *Race Men* and several others. In addition, the long twentieth century period of African American literature is central and complementary to this project as it provides a framework across and within which to explore Black heterodox religiosities and the notion of uncalling in terms of their potential influence on collectivity—what Fred Moten calls "radical Black sociality": the ability to consent not to be a single being. These formulations of collectivity and being intrigue me and is what guides this project as I undertake a critique of recognition and seek out possible philosophical and theological alternatives. Although my research is grounded in the long twentieth century, it gestures towards contemporary social movements as they relate to the politics of recognition and its alternatives. This broader literary context offers an opportunity to compare and contrast these two moments in Black literature and culture—including specific ways that

Black intellectual anxieties regarding Christianity as opiate and tool of white supremacy (anxieties shared by Wright, Du Bois, and Baldwin) have influenced literature and culture; and how that perspective relates to alternative possibilities for community and resistance.

My project takes an interdisciplinary approach as it utilizes texts from Black theology, sociology, history, rhetorical theory, literary fiction and nonfiction. It is invested in critical theories of race, class, gender and power, as well as decolonial psychology and identity formation. It investigates how Black protest and freedom struggles have been imagined and executed in the U.S. from the long twentieth century to the present; and it brings together those histories of resistance with theories of recognition, settler colonial power, and what it means to be human. Building off of these two fields of study, I highlight the problem with contemporary models of protest and their limitations. At the same time, I look at spaces and moments of Black creativity and empowerment that exist in the radical sociality of nonmainstream spiritual belief systems and traditions that have nothing to do with outward desires for external state recognition as a way to gain or attain freedom. My project deviates from the works I am using as it takes the recognition theories and traditions of Black protest and then the liberatory possibilities of minor Black religiosities to make the case for an alternative to current ways of thinking protest and freedom.

I ground my discussion in the driving theoretical question that asks, what alternative liberatory possibilities exist for Black lives outside of, and at the limits of state-based forms of recognition? By tracing the contributions of literary fiction, such as

Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain,* and Paul Laurence Dunbar's *The Uncalled* I aim to destabilize the longstanding notion within popular manifestations of Black protest and freedom struggles that calls for recognition as the best and only way to strategize and think about Black liberation movements in the U.S. The connection then, between calling by God and recognition by the state is this, that, the state has long since attempted to use Christianity or religious tropes such as calling to shape Black desires for acceptance. Calling then, for the state, becomes a way to marginalize Black folks and neutralize our sense of belonging culturally and spiritually. To be an uncalled figure has less to do with one's connection to God and more with akeen awareness of how the state dictates what it means to be human.

I examine a range of historical and theological texts that both help to define and provide important context for the terms heterodox Black religiosities and the figure of the uncalled—central pillars of my argument—thereby laying the spiritual and theoretical groundwork for the remainder of the project. I cite scholars such as Chireau who describe African American spiritual practitioners who were "gifted with enhanced insight into the invisible realm" (23), able to "manipulate unseen forces or 'work the spirits'" (21) to achieve a "conceptual measure of control and power over their circumstances" (24-5). It introduces my readers to the fundamental questions and concerns I intend to cover, including: What are the dangers in continued pursuit of our current strategy for Black liberation? Might there be a better way that already exists?

After highlighting the creative, healing, and empowering elements of noncanonical Black religiosity and spiritual belief systems, as well as the subversive collectivity that is made possible in such spaces, I address the traditions of Black protest that have actively sought the recognition of white supremacist settler-state structures of power. In it, I frame liberal forms of recognition-based protest as not only limited, but also as counterproductive to freedom struggles that actually seek to break, overturn, or bypass such structures of oppression. As Coulthard argues: "The politics of recognition in its contemporary liberal form promises to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist, patriarchal state power that Indigenous people's demands for recognition have historically sought to transcend" (3). The introduction will briefly make visible both the problem with current models of protest and an alternative way of thinking freedom that I will build upon in subsequent chapters.

Chapter One examines two very different novels that approach the idea of liberation from two very divergent directions. Rising to the surface are three key questions: Who is in control of your healing? With regards to protest, from which direction ought desires for recognition flow—inward or outward? Who is ultimately responsible for your wellness, or freedom? *Native Son* and *Salt Eaters* illustrate not only the problems with outward drives for the recognition of Black life by settler-state power, but also the possibilities made available by and through the inward self-affirming journeys found in heterodox Black religiosities and with the figure of the uncalled. Through the character of Mr. Max, *Native Son* articulates the all-too- popular Black call

for white recognition; while *The Salt Eaters'* spiritual practitioner, Minnie Ransom, embodies the very figure of the uncalled described in the introduction.

This chapter pairs the novels with a number of theoretical, historical, and theological texts, such as James Baldwin's *Notes of a Native Son*; Richard Wright's *Blueprint for Negro Writing*; Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*; Theophus H. Smith's *Conjure Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America;* Erica R. Edwards' *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership;* C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya's *The Black Church in the African American Experience;* and Noel Leo Erskine's *Black Theology and Pedagogy*—as well as many others in order to begin the process of shifting our attention away from recognition-based forms of protest and toward self-defining, culturally affirming modes of being in the world and with others, arguing that we have the power and control necessary for freedom and healing within and that looking outside to the oppressive systems of power to define our humanity and terms of protest add to the problem rather than subtracting from it. This chapter demonstrates that there is a viable alternative to our current popular strategies that are bound to calls for inclusion and recognition. The alternative is a kind of freedom struggle that looks inward for wellness while surrounded by a supportive radical Black sociality. And though this may not be the only path to freedom, it is certainly a viable option that takes into consideration a few of the obstacles that exist in current models; such as patriarchy, capitalism, settler-colonialism, and non-mutual recognition. The uncalled figure then, is the best example for what that alternative might look like. They are in a better position to imagine, think,

and be otherwise. Having been rejected by Western definitions and values, the uncalled figure is free to create their own meanings. Because they willingly operate outside of normative expectations, the idea of being uncalled now is an advantage that situates this figure in a liberatory space, not ruled by a need to respond to calling. Therefore, I use such a figure to highlight this alternative state of being. An example. One that is not counter-productive to aims of liberation.

Chapters Two and Three are closely related and will examine the same topics of recognition-based protest and heterodox Black religiosities addressed in the introduction and evidenced in Chapter One. In this chapter, I hope to remedy the neglect that self-affirming healing and unorthodox spiritual practices suffer in terms of how we often think protest and liberation. Turning on its head the notion of invisibility expressed in *Invisible Man,* this anti-external recognition model of protest—rather than lament—embraces the unseen, uncalled, and undervalued mark of white supremacy. Rather than looking to be made visible on the terms of the willfully blind oppressor, the figure of the uncalled already enjoys visibility on his or her own terms and by his or her own definitions. Embracing the freedom in creating one's own narratives and mythologies, spiritual practices, and mystical potentialities is what uncalled figures, such as Pilate Dead, do to turn the pleas inherent in Ellison's invisible man for recognition from a request to the adamant address: "You can't see me!". Therefore, I read *Invisible Man* in the same vein as *Native Son*—another, much better version of Black authors' cry to white folks for recognition. I read *Song of Solomon* and specifically the character of Pilate Dead

as a counter narrative to *Invisible Man* and an example of a liberatory mode of protest not bound by the co-pilot of recognition.

Chapter Four will conclude my set of close readings and examples of uncalled figures and the spaces of heterodox Black religiosities they inhabit. It will continue to focus on the inherent benefits of an indigenous African and African-descended (reinterpreted/negotiated) spirituality that nurtures self-definition, cultural practices, and radical networks of Black collectivity; as well as raises awareness of the danger, frustration, and limitations of trying to meet the demands of whiteness and living through the paradigm of white eyes. I read *Daughters of the Dust,* the Matriarch Nana Peazant, the Unborn Child, and the influence of ancestors on the Gullah islands as part and parcel of what I have termed heterodox Black religiosities and the figure of the uncalled. Nana and the Unborn Child in *Daughters of the Dust* operate much like Minnie Ransom and Old Wife in *The Salt Eaters*—as the pairing of a spiritual practitioner aided and accompanied by the dead, or not-yet alive, or something that refuses the distinction. My chapter will add to this conversation by giving more examples of this alternative means to gain freedom and wholeness. It will trouble the common assumption that posits recognition as a necessary component of Black protest. I will explore the possibility of self-empowerment and divergent spiritual belief systems that fall out of dominant Western Christianity's mandates.

What I hope becomes clear, is the link between recognition and calling. I get into why Baldwin is so critical to that connection on page 42. However, in an effort to make it plain sooner, I maintain that calling/uncalling relates to recognition in the sense that if it

is the state that is doing the calling then it is also the state that is in the position to offer and deny recognition. This results in the notion of uncalling, a position of posibility, however, in the way I am using it. In other words, not being recognized by the state places one outside of calling (oppressive Western values and definitions shrouwded in the language of protestant Christianity). However, by embracing the position of uncalling, one such a figure can reject the rejection of their Black humanity and find freedom in living outside of the politics of recognition.

Ultimately, I place *Song of Solomon, The Salt Eaters,* and *Daughters of the Dust* in conversation with what I have termed the figure of the uncalled, Heterodox Black religiosities, and spiritual practices in order to make the case for black feminist narratives of uncalling to problematize and offer an alternative to the politics of recognition which African American male authors like Wright and Ellison embrace. Black feminist narratives, especially the ones that I analyze in this dissertation, construct the framework for problematizing forms of Black protest by radically transforming conceptions of self as liberatory and not governed by a state that will not grant them recognition. It seems Wright and Ellison prove to remain being called because they can function in patriarchy due to their masculinity, whereas black women are intersectionally denied politics of recognition and doubly oppressed.

My dissertation concludes with an examination of the frequency of love, self-love and the creation of aa radical and subversive collectivity as a viable alternative to recognition-based forms of popular Black protest, a theory prevalent in Black feminist writings. I hope to offer an alternative that looks inward rather than outward for

freedom—an alternative that does not underpin the very structures it hopes to defeat. What I am suggesting is a recalibration, a shift in the way we imagine our options for resistance, a refocusing of what we see as the answer to the problem of white supremacist power over Black lives.

## Chapter 1: Are You Sure You Want to Be Well?: The Direction of Recognition and the Frequency of Wholeness in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* and Richard Wright's *Native Son*

Both of these novels are key to the question of recognition's place and ultimate value when it comes to Black protest, freedom, and wholeness. Wright's *Native Son* is a prominent and canonical African American text that goes out of its way to highlight the hardships and struggles of being Black in the United States during the thirties. For some, it is merely an overly sentimental protest novel intended to inform and rebuke white people for their role in perpetuating racist practices and institutions that oppress and limit Black life and opportunities. It is a critical place to investigate the relationship between protest and recognition. Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* then, is a text that comes along around forty years later and points protest in a different direction. Instead of trying to convince white folks to see us as human the novel attempts to get Black folks to look inward to wellness. Though I articulate the problems with protest and what I see happening in *Native* Son (and with recognition over all) I first use *The Salt Eaters* as an example of what else is possible. To do so, I begin with an analysis of various Black spirituality, traditions, and practices that often get over looked.

Scholars of theology and the history of Christianity have long argued that there exist liberatory, communal, and ontological benefits within many African American spiritual traditions that diverge from mainstream formulations of prescribed religiosity.

This section seeks to identify those benefits as they have been articulated by figures of the uncalled and within heterodox Black religiosities.

Black religious experiences in the U.S. have been anything but static, fixed, or monolithic; and while working in the world to create and recreate meaning, some have remained invisible to many. The multifarious spiritual belief systems and practices that the term heterodox Black religiosities encompasses are shown in this section to be vehicles for pushing back against white theology's interpretations of Blackness and Black people's place in the world, definitions of what it means to be human, other-worldly patience, and prescriptions for one-sided sentimental love for the oppressor. This section seeks to make visible not only the subversive qualities and benefits of Black religious thought and practices exercised against white supremacy, but also the generative, healing, and transformative power that exists independent of and without concern for whiteness within these Black spaces and places of collectivity.

These heterodoxies arising out of the creative imaginings and pragmatic necessities of Black life—combining elements of Protestant Christianity, Conjure traditions, African-centered theology, Yoruba traditions, and Muslim and Black Israelite religions—form a complex belief community that turns inward to self-affirming practices that can adjust the very frequency of reality. Figures of the uncalled can be understood to be supernatural practitioners of new realities—singular figures in relation to the larger collective only in terms of frequency and only until those frequencies are able to match one another. These figures are also uncalled because popular white Protestant notions of calling have historically sought through divine and economic compulsion to order Black

lives and subjectivities as inferior objects of labor production bound by duty. They are uncalled because they reject such imposed duty by states of power that refuse to recognize their humanity; because they do not require external recognition to affirm their humanity; and because they are able to achieve power over their own circumstances within the heterodox ecologies of Black spiritual and communal life. Uncalling then, encompasses a rejection of the kind of calling that the state repeatedly deploys in economic as well as theological terms only to deny later. They are separate, yet bound together as Western/white supremacist values and definitions seek to construct ones being. The further removed from such a calling, the better which allows for more effective resistance against rejection.

I would characterize figures of the uncalled in much the same way that Chireau's *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* describes African American spiritual practitioners—as "gifted [individuals] with enhanced insight into the invisible realm" (23) who call upon unseen spiritual forces to gain creative power and control over their earthly circumstances (24).[1] To clarify, this is not to say that such a power is absent in those Black folks who understand themselves to be called. Instead, it has more to do with how the state deploys the calling. The notion of uncalling is directly related to the state'suse or attempt to use religious tropes and the language of belonging such as calling, acceptance, citizenship, and recognition to further oppress Black people

[1] Depending on the region, these individuals are known as "conjurers," "hoodoos," "root workers," "root doctors," "conjure doctors," "goopher-doctors," "two-headed doctors," "wise men," "longheads," and "double-sighters."

and minimize their desire to resist. In fact, there may not even be actual distinction in the mind of the uncalled. According to Chireau, although Conjure's association with magic is often viewed as antithetical to Christianity as a religion (12), for Black Americans, the two traditions—specifically Protestantism and African-inspired practices—often share complementary forms, ideas, and interests (6, 67). As the lines distinguishing the two systems shift and blur, and as they meet both mutual and exclusive needs, "spiritually pragmatic Black Americans" move seamlessly between these two platforms—utilizing each to access the supernatural world to obtain healing, protection, and self-defense" (Chireau, 12, 24-5); as well as "power, explanation, and control" (Chireau, 20). Chireau's work gestures not only toward the power of African American spiritual traditions to resist white supremacist interpretations of Christianity, but also, most importantly, to their power to create something else.

The figure of the uncalled represents more than merely the supernatural or spiritual power to enact "alternative possibilities for empowerment" (Chireau, 18). Both economically and spiritually, it references a being in the world who does not derive his or her value or fulfillment from the external duty to labor. A calling suggests that one has a divine mandate to perform while on earth—a role to live out. The notion of calling, then, describes a right relationship between an individual and God as the individual lives out God's purpose for his or her life. This idea quickly loses religious significance, however, and becomes a way for state power to harness the uncritical consent of its citizens to fuel capitalism (Weber, 40). This is calling in the sense described by Weber in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* where fulfilling one's duty in worldly

affairs is valued as living in a manner acceptable to God—achieving "the highest form that the moral activity of the individual could assume . . . through fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling" (40).

The uncalled has no desire to join or to be recognized by a world structured by a Protestant work ethic and spirit of capitalism that derives its power from notions of calling. Calling is a *this-worldly* mandate that organizes people into *divine* labor categories suited for the state's production needs, absent any actual contemplation. The figure of the uncalled, then, struggles both against modern conceptions of labor capital/state value systems (calling) and the white supremacist aims of Western Christianity (calling). He or she no longer accepts his or her *place in the world*. This figure is emblematic of Black folks who in the face of the violence of dehumanization and assimilation efforts have created new worlds and meanings that help them thrive and not just survive.

The figure of the uncalled resists capitalistic notions of calling prerequisite to gaining fulfillment and acceptance. The undervalued, rejected, uncalled figure—denied access socially and politically to white life—is not called on to participate in a relationship of mutual recognition; and she or he does not register this lack of recognition by whites and the systemic global mechanisms of white supremacy as a lack of his or her own humanity, worth, or generative capability to create meaning and connections among the rest of the uncalled. Self-defining and defending, the figure of the uncalled rather than being a utopic figure exists as an undertheorized figure in Black literature and social

movements. In other words, the figure of the uncalled is not a perfect imaginative exercise about what could be possible, but has defined what is already possible, and can defend what already exists.

Heterodox Black religiosities fall outside the normative and hegemonic traditions of the Christianity introduced by white people (and endorsed by many Black people since slavery) that served the white supremacist aims of dehumanization and assimilation. Uncalling is a rejection not only of white recognition and notions of calling, but also of many (not all) mainstream Black understandings of calling that suffer the same entanglement with logics of white supremacy. For example, Minnie Ransom's abrupt departure from a mainstream Black seminary can be read as a refusal of the calling derived from sanctioned spiritual traditions, both Black and white, since many of the state-sanctioned Black spiritual traditions borrow heavily from the white ones that have excluded them.

Black folk reinterpreted not only the pieces of religiosity they were able to retain from Africa, but also those of Western enforcement—with a twist based on what was needed at the time. Through practices of communal worship, they were able to transcend the boundaries between self and spirit; and by systems of appropriation, such as Conjure, they were able to tap into spiritual energies and make them work for them (Chireau, 32). Christianity and Conjure were not mutually exclusive in the everyday lives of enslaved Africans and their descendants. Religious meaning was more promiscuous—eclectic and unrestrained by Western intentions or interpretations. In fact, the Bible itself was seen by many as a Conjure book (Smith, 3).

Black religious traditions such as Conjure and Christianity blended to create redefine, and appropriate new forms of spiritual practices that empowered, healed, and nurtured community, made meaning, met this-worldly needs, and transformed reality. They also waged strong critiques on and indictments against white supremacist Western interpretations of the Bible and Blacks' place in Christendom. Erskine argues in *Black Theology and Pedagogy* that Black theologians "refuse to pattern their approach to pedagogy and God-talk after the method of exclusion adopted and embraced by White academics and theologians within the church" (4). Whether for liberation or reconciliation, Black theologians engaged the racism they saw inherent in white forms of Biblical hermeneutics and "sought to free their people with truth as they engaged those who within church and academy would compromise their humanity" (Erskine, 3). The white call to love one's neighbor/oppressor was rebuffed by the inseparable link between "love and justice" (Erskine, 5). Without justice for Blacks, there could be no love for whites or their interpretive practices. However, some Black people's desire for recognition and acceptance led to a rejection of indigenous African ways of knowing and being that could have countered white constructions of Blackness as illegitimate, inferior, and even less than human (Clark, 4).

By turning our attention and efforts for liberation toward the possibilities available in heterodox Black religiosities—what Clark argues in his book *Indigenous Black Theology* is a reimagining of theological methodology based on indigenous African thought as a model for recovery and agency—Black folks can reaffirm what Western Christianity deems to be "subjugated knowledge" (a term borrowed from Michel

Foucault). Clark further maintains that viewing as legitimate those ancient African belief systems of thought that were suppressed and dismissed opens the door to their being blended with Christianity(3), resulting in "a Christian doctrine of the human being, based on indigenous African thought, which can be useful to black Christians who seek to affirm themselves, and their ancestral culture" (Clark, 103).

This fluid and complex ground for defining what it means to be human and that does not rely on Western definitions or recognition for liberation or meaning-making is at the core of what I mean by heterodox Black religiosities. Hucks argues in *Yoruba Traditions & African American Religious Nationalism* for a kind of "theological openness . . . an amalgam of sacred knowledges" (227) that allows for a reinterpretation of Western Christianity's category for Blackness as inferior (28). In other words, heterodox Black religiosities can provide its practitioners with new texts to renarrativize their existence as global citizens (Hucks, 121).

Raboteau asserts the importance of remembering that "the slaves did not simply become Christians; they creatively fashioned a Christian tradition to fit their own peculiar experience of enslavement in America" (209). Though forbidden on pain of flogging to attend church, to gather informally to worship God, or even to pray—both within and without canonical formulations, Black folk created their own worship protocols: "The religion of the slave was both institutional and noninstitutional, visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted" (Raboteau, 213).

Among the problems found in popular discourse surrounding Western notions of Christianity are its apparent charges for slaves to "obey their masters" (Colossians 3:22)

and to wait patiently for the kingdom of God that is yet to come (John 18:36). Such scriptural passages urging longsuffering and submission provided an apparent divine support for the established order.

Despite the fact that many enslaved Africans and African Americans were forced to sit through sermons that perpetuated this message of pacification and anti-Black sentiment, Raboteau argues that "slaves were distrustful of the white folks' interpretation of the Scriptures and wanted to be able to search them for themselves" (239). Freedom was not interpreted as merely spiritual: "Religious images, such as freedom, were ambiguous. To some slaves they undoubtedly meant freedom from physical as well as spiritual bondage" (Raboteau, 248). However, the lived situations in which the enslaved found themselves were so horrific and the chances to effect immediate systemic change were so remote that an otherworldly hope often provided temporary solace and the strength to continue.

The spirituals and other songs that seemed to reference a longing for the next life were in no way one dimensional or single focused and served multiple purposes. Raboteau states that "the spirituals, then, were capable of communicating on more than one level of meaning" (249). The claim that Christianity as it related to Black folks was merely otherworldly and compensatory was a misleading oversimplification, according to Raboteau, who asserts that the slaves built their hope on a God whose intervention in the affairs of men—in their affairs—was evident in all dimensions of time (past, present, and future). The God who had acted on behalf of biblical Israel would surely hear their cries and deliver them; for as His children, they also had personal value and ultimate worth.

And so, defying their masters, they met "in the quarters, groves, and 'hush harbors' [where religion provided] a space of meaning, freedom, and transcendence" (Raboteau, 318),

By viewing themselves as God's "chosen people," deliverance was always at the forefront of their religious imaginaries—whether in this world or the next, whether by their hands or the miraculous hand of God. They possessed an identity based partly on extreme worth that helped to offset the devaluing hermeneutics of white supremacy. The sense of value that arose from these collective religious spaces of heterodox Black religiosities and radical Black socialites of the uncalled was made possible and increased by Black folks' ability to define and manage the systems of meaning that sought to manage them.

Dorman's *Chosen People: The Rise of American Black Israelite Religions* highlights the power of Black folks to create, recreate, and define their relationship to Judeo-Christian mythologies. He used the term "Black Israelite" not in reference to the skin color of ancient Israelites, but as an identifier of the racial identity ascribed to them regardless of the faith they embraced—whether Judaism, Christianity, or Rastafarianism (Dorman, 4).

Dorman makes clear that the combining of Jewish rituals and customs with African American Christianity and Conjure produced "a kind of polyculturalism that allowed a reblending of the already blended spiritual traditions available to African Americans into new religions in the twentieth century" (155, 187). Heterodox Black religiosities in line with the polyculturalism that Dorman describes can help heal and

push back marks of shame and humiliation. Most importantly, they can help us to "view ourselves and others as fully human" (Dorman, 188).

Lincoln and Mamiya called this liberatory creative force or practice the "black sacred cosmos"—the "religious worldview of African Americans [that] is related both to their African heritage, which envisaged the whole universe as sacred, and to their conversion to Christianity during slavery and its aftermath" (2). They maintain that only during the past two decades have scholars in the fields of African American history, religion, and culture "begun to recognize that black people created their own unique and distinctive forms of culture and worldviews as parallels rather than replications of the culture in which they were involuntary guests" (Lincoln, Mamiya, 2).

I conclude this section on the histories of heterodox Black religiosities with the legacies of colonialism and empire that connect both Christianization and racialization to my work of thinking away from popular forms of protest that hinge on the desires for recognition and toward a radical Black sociality of the uncalled. Carter's *Race: A Theological Account* highlights the connection between the "discourse of theology" and construction of the modern racial being (4). Building off of Immanuel Kant's racial theory, Carter establishes "how theology came to aid and abet—indeed . . . as a discourse [how] it came to provide the inner architecture of modern racial reasoning." He traces how "whiteness came to function as a substitute for the Christian doctrine of creation, thus producing a reality into which all else must enter" (Carter, 4-5). Less concerned with how Western Christianity sought to pacify Africans and their descendants, Carter utilizes the methodology of genealogy that Cornel West deploys to argue that Christianity did not

just devalue Black folk; it also created the racial categories that defined them. West and Carter understand race not as a stable, static, and natural category but as a tool of Western civilization to make Christianity white. Carter argues that—

> the modern invention of race or the story of its naturalization is a problem that is pseudotheological or religious in character. . . . Behind the modern problem of race is the problem of how Christianity and Western Civilization came to be thoroughly identified with each other, a problem linked to the severance of Christianity from its Jewish roots. . . . Christianity became the white man's religion (Carter, 229, 286).

Given the intimate connection between Christianization and racialization, the answer to the theological problem of whiteness for Carter is not just redefinition of Christian character and creations of new Black religiosities and life worlds that value African and African American lives. It is also the ability to "inhabit the world beyond racial and theological—the two are bound together—closure" (Carter, 379). I would add, a world beyond white recognition.

What should be abundantly clear at this point is that Black folk have and continue to carve out—in the face of the white supremacist aims of Western Christianity—their own unique combinations and negotiated networks of religious beliefs that have provided healing, radical sociality, validation, efficacy and liberation—new worlds and ways of being that can and have offered more to Black protest efforts than cries for nonmutual state recognition doled out on unequal terms.

In the next section, I answer the following questions: "What is recognition?" "What in particular does the figure of the uncalled do to or with recognition?" "What is at stake in Black protest?"

**The Limits of Recognition and the Confines of Protest**

This section seeks to examine the history and theory surrounding recognition as a modality of protest and as a component of sociopolitical change generally, and Black protest in the U.S. more specifically. In it, I hope to provide a working definition and understanding of recognition and to highlight how it not only falls short of its liberatory goals, but also actually reinforces the very mechanisms of oppression that it seeks to overcome. By utilizing the works of Fanon, Coulthard, Baldwin, and others, I will draw out the connections between recognition and protest and make the case that as a strategy of liberation, protest that is bound up in calls for recognition is at best misguided and at worst counterproductive. This section outlines the limitations of recognition and the need for an alternative—an alternative that looks inward rather than outward for freedom, that does not underpin the very structures it hopes to defeat, and that can be found in heterodox Black religiosities and the figure of the uncalled addressed in the first section.

What I am suggesting is a recalibration—a shift in the way we imagine our options for resistance, a refocusing of what we see as the answer to the problem of white supremacist power over Black lives. I firmly believe that there is a great deal at stake with the issue of recognition; and I submit my observations and arguments as an important contribution to the collective folk and academic conversations about Blackness, oppression, and how to be in the world together.

Regarding the limits of recognition-based protest, I begin with Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* in which he argues that in its contemporary liberal form, the politics of recognition—though marketed as welcome in a new era of inclusion and reciprocity—is far from mutual, is decidedly one sided, and promises to continue the oppressive configurations of state power that the demands for recognition hope to transcend (3). Building off the work of Day, Coulthard defines the politics of recognition in relation to Indigenous claims of nationhood, discusses the legal and political relationship of these claims with the Canadian state, and considers the current wide range of recognition-based models of liberation that seek reconciliation with the settler-state structure (3).

I describe the politics of recognition as the evolutionary tactics of white supremacist settler-state structures of domination that oppress and exclude and fan the flames for freedom and inclusion. Perceived accommodation efforts seem begrudgingly to bestow recognition upon the rejected (the uncalled) on terms that in no way threaten the power relations and that have the added benefit of calming and defusing protest. The politics of recognition operates as the nonmutual sociopolitical relationship that promises freedom while reinforcing oppression. Moreover, that which is withheld and denied from Black folk—a place within systems of Western thought, definitions, theology, values, capitalism, and patriarchy—encourages the drive for that which is itself destructive to Black life and even when partially granted leaves the possibility of freedom a far way off.

Coulthard asserts that colonial rule never truly ended but merely became more covert, making "the transition from a more-or-less unconcealed structure of domination

to a mode of colonial *governmentality* that works through the limited freedoms afforded by . . . state recognition and accommodation" (16). According to Hegel's master/slave dialectic, "liberal politics of recognition assumes that our identities are formed *intersubjectively* through our complex social interactions with other subjects" (Coulthard, 17). The problem, however, is that identities are not formed equally or completely and can be deformed if one side thinks that he or she needs recognition from the other, yet has no way of defining the terms. Considered through the lens of Fanon's critique of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, Coulthard concludes that rather than being a source of freedom, recognition is, in fact the power field utilized by colonial relations to produce and maintain power (16). Based upon this understanding of recognition and the politics of recognition, I suggest the need for an alternative.

Coulthard summarizes Fanon's critique of recognition as "delegated exchanges of recognition" and domination that occur in the real world, where the boundaries of accommodation are limited in scope to those that best serve the interests of the dominant influence (17). This critique points to a structural problem with colonial recognition that locks the "subaltern populations" into "psycho-affective" attachments to these structures that over time serve to maintain these structures (Coulthard, 18). Herein lies the impetus to seek an alternative to recognition for the Indigenous peoples of Canada and for Black folk in the U.S. As I posit heterodox Black religiosities as a possible alternative to desires for external legal and political state-based recognition, Coulthard puts forth the term "resurgent politics of recognition" to signal a similar shift in perspective. His liberatory focus is more about the empowerment that is made available through

individual and collective self-fashioning and through Indigenous people's cultural practices. This is a radical alternative and threatens the very structure of state-based recognition that reinforces colonial power (18). Recognition as a paradigm was not completely rejected as Coulthard comments on Fanon's critique. Rather, Fanon's work seems to advise the redirection of our attention to the power that colonized people have within themselves, within their self-affirmative cultural practices; and it warns of the danger in relying too much on external state powers and oppressive institutions to do it for them (23). Drawing both from Coulthard and Fanon, I urge a second look at the self-affirming capabilities of Black folk.

Moving away from the general colonial context and more specifically toward the states of oppression experienced here in the United settler-states of America during and subsequent to the enslavement of Black folk, I embrace Fanon's strategy of self-affirmation. In paying closer attention to the cultural practices of Africans and African Americans, I arrive at the heterodox Black religiosities and radical Black socialities of the uncalled that I described in section one as an alternative approach to recognition—one that empowers as it rejects a sense of self constructed by the oppressor.

Hegel's master/slave narrative claims that social relations are "at the forefront of human subjectivity" and that "relations of recognition are deemed 'constitutive of subjectivity'" in that "one becomes an individual subject only by virtue of recognizing and being recognized by another subject" (Coulthard, 27-8). Such a formulation clearly is a problem if said recognition comes from white supremacist power structures that do not require Black recognition—just Black folks to think that white recognition is required for

liberation. Fanon argues that the colonial system of governance depends on the "'internalization' of the forms of racist recognition imposed or bestowed on the Indigenous population by the colonial state and society" (Coulthard, 31). The irony of helping to stabilize a system against which one is actively protesting and which one is seeking to overturn bears close scrutiny and underscores the need for an alternative.

Posing little to no threat to the structures of power, recognition-based forms of protest merely hope for a kind though unlikely surrendering of power. Unfortunately, this is not how it looks to those protesting. Noise is made, minor struggles ensue, equality and humanity are demanded/requested (not from a place of leverage but of optimism); then, in order to calm the disenfranchised, small changes are affected. However, colonial powers (for Coulthard and Fanon) and U.S. settler-state powers for my purposes "will only recognize the collective rights and identities of indigenous peoples [and Black folks] in so far as this recognition does not throw into question the background legal, political, and economic framework of the colonial relationship itself" (Coulthard, 41). Apart from strategies of violence or *begging* (negotiating without leverage), freedom must be sought outside of such external forms of recognition-based protests against the state. In order to lay the groundwork for substantive change that does not reinforce the structures we hope to escape, we ought to look inward. Quoting Bell Hooks, Coulthard states: "Such a project would minimally require that we stop being so preoccupied with looking 'to that other for recognition'; instead we should be 'recognizing' ourselves and [then seeking to] make contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner" (Coulthard, 48).

The solution appears to be twofold. We must look inward for recognition and validation, for new definitions, values, and ways of being in the world; then we must call into question the very structures that either deny or promise inclusion. Looking inward decenters the state-sanctioned hegemonic white supremacist other as the authority and final word of subjectification, or what it means to be human. Coulthard's resurgent politics of recognition seeks to "practice decolonial, gender emancipatory, and economically nonexploitative alternative structures of a law and sovereign authority grounded on a critical refashioning of the best of Indigenous legal and political traditions" (179). I would argue for something similar for Black folks in the U.S.— the radical Black socialities of the uncalled.

In Section B of *Black Skin, White Masks,* Fanon directly engages Hegel's master/slave dialectic, which assumes an absolute reciprocity and the mutual desire for recognition and need (217-8). Hegel's formulation posits that it is essential to human consciousness to be recognized by the other, and that being is measured by the degree of one's apprehension by the other. The reciprocity described by Hegel does not exist in the settler colonial context, in which the master mocks the idea of slave consciousness, repudiates the need for slave recognition, and values only the slave's labor (Fanon, 220). This is the major problem with the contemporary liberal politics of recognition that assumes a reciprocity that does not exist. Instead, its accomplishments are wholly one-sided. By granting limited freedoms on their own terms, colonial or settler colonial governmentalities succeed in disguising the subjective, oppressive power relationships. The politics of recognition perpetuates a cycle of rejection and later *acceptance* that does

nothing to change the foundational structures of state power. Black folk in the U.S., like their Indigenous sisters and brothers in Canada, are encouraged to seek outside recognition when true empowerment is found in self-affirmation.

If calls for recognition do little to change the background structures of colonial and settler colonial power relations and if they lack sufficient leverage to stop the violence suffered at the foreground, then protest must begin elsewhere. If calls for recognition help oppressive state systems of domination, then a rejection of white recognition may prove to be an effective threat and means of liberation.

Although the state systems of power seem to benefit from the politics of recognition, they still attempt to regulate exactly how desires for recognition transition into modes of protest. Western Christianity has sought to instruct Black folks on a proper response. Unfortunately, white calls for patience and nonviolence insult many African Americans who actively fight for justice, equality, and all the perks that attend being recognized as fully human. Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* describes the limitations of accepting such prescribed methods of protest and suggests that in the face of such overt brutality and horror, recognition ought not be the sole or central aim of Black protest. He asserts that what truly threatens the white world is Black people's refusal to accept the white world's definitions (Baldwin, 69).

The figure of the uncalled assumes Baldwin's attitude toward protest and recognition and pursues alternative definitions and values in heterodox Black religiosities. For a mode of protest that seeks to educate and plead with the oppressor to acknowledge something so simple and apparent as one's humanity is a mode of protest

that ignores the painful truth that the lack of acknowledgment rather than being a matter of ignorance is a lack of concern. Therefore, recognition if granted not only would strengthen the governmentality in question but would also be too late. According to Baldwin, there are those such as Black Muslims who—after almost 400 years of bondage and being despised by a nation that still refuses to recognize their humanity—no longer want it. It seems unwise then to model our identities or strategies for freedom on white definitions, values, theologies, tactics, time tables, or terms.

A brief look back over a history of Black freedom struggles I see the same thing can be seen--A desire for Black lives to be seen as fully human by white eyes. Whether it was the fights for the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century, or against segregation and the jim crow laws that came after, political inclusion, equal housing and schooling opportunities, the prison industrial complex, and the excessive and over militarized policing of Black bodies each example seems to only mark the degrees in which power choose to respond to Black concerns for their own humanity. The structures of power however have effectively remain unchanged. In fact, the NFL today will show the paradox of Black protest. Not only are we socialized to seek out white recognition (by many Black leaders), only for it to be denied us later, but we are also told how to protest by white news, political and social media outlets. I say this limits freedom because concessions do not equal a change in power it merely reinforces it. This is supported by the unfortunate reality of how Black bodies are still, to this day, treated with little to no regard. And how the NFL calls for Black bodies to produce labor and capital gains for white power structures and profit (fitting in with calling).

Black protest in the U.S. has been bound to and limited by not only a liberal politics of recognition, but also by a warped theology of love. The most prevalent *mis*interpretation Western Christianity hoped to pass on to Black folk's consciousness was the notion that they were simply to love their oppressor in the face of injustice; to love and accept the oppression of this world in anticipation of the world to come, for surely this is what Jesus taught. Black Power does not allow for such a white supremacist reading of the biblical mandate to love. On the contrary, Cone in *Black Theology & Black Power* argues that when Black people begin to use their own hermeneutic practices to interpret Jesus' message and relate it back to their current suffering, then Christianity becomes for them a religion of protest and not an endorsement of affliction (37).

Here Cone is able to reconcile Black theology and Black Power, positioning Black Power at the center of Christianity itself while uncritical calls from whites for Black folk to simply love in the face of injustice are quickly critiqued and dismissed: "To demand freedom is to demand justice. When there is no justice in the land, a man's freedom is threatened. Freedom and justice are interdependent. . . . Unfortunately, many whites pretend that they do not understand what the black man is demanding" (43). This is yet another reason why desires for white recognition seem beside the point. When love, like recognition, is far from mutual, the base line of equality and what it means to be human are in contention? "Black theology [says] that those who oppress others are in no position to define what love is" (Cone, 71). This is at the heart of Black Power's critique of white theology and at the center of what Cone means by Black theology when he writes: "The new black man [the one who possesses a new identity in Christ—one of

value and worth] refuses to speak of love without justice and power. Love without the power to guarantee justice in human relations is meaningless."

Challenging the use of the word *love* in the world as a kind of tacit acceptance of dehumanization, Cone argues that the sentimental love that white theology attempts to yoke to Black folk is not love at all, for it has no cost. In contrast, he maintains that love demands the whole of one's being. And since whites' love relegates Black folks to the status of nonpersons, love is not possible between the two (53). This sentimental love has no obligation to justice and ignores its relationship to power (or powerlessness).

Highlighting Tillich's contributions to contemporary theology, Cone maintains that love, power, and justice ought not be viewed separately. It is an error to believe that love is a resignation of power, or that power is a denial of love. Powerless love and loveless power are inadequate representations of love and should be rejected (Cone, 53-4). Tillich and Cone here provide an important example of what I have termed heterodox Black religiosities. Black theology redefines love and resists Western Christianity's interpretation of love as powerless and emotional.

Tillich and Cone further explain not only the problem with white conceptions of love, but also the problem with not being allowed to affirm one's self. Love is the "reunion of the estranged," and power is the "possibility of self-affirmation in spite of internal and external negation." For Tillich and Cone, love and power must be understood together in order to achieve reunion and being (Cone, 54). For Tillich, love as the foundation "not the negation of power" can no longer be co-opted as an excuse to give up one's power and concede to oppression and subjugation (Cone, 54).

This redefinition of love and interpretation of violence are more than just a radical Black Christian's attempt to reconcile Black theology with the critiques waged by Black Power. It is an example of the liberatory kinds of protest that have less to do with recognition and more to do with creating new worlds and conceptual frameworks that I described in connection with heterodox Black religiosities as practical ways that exist to gain freedom and control over one's life. Models of liberation should not be dictated by the oppressor. Cone concludes by writing: "The religious ideas of the oppressor are detrimental to the black people's drive for freedom. . . . They tend to make black people nonviolent and accept only the prescribed patterns of protest defined by the oppressor himself" (131). As an alternative, Cone offers Black theology as a revolutionary theology that seeks "to create new value-perspectives for the oppressed" (135). This is the work of the uncalled.

Cone in *A Black Theology of Liberation* further explains why it is so important for Black liberation not to accept white definitions and argues that Black theology must reject the counsel of those who urge Blacks to accept societal limits placed on them "for it is tantamount to suicide. . . . [It is] the ultimate expression of despair. If we accept white definitions of blackness, we destroy ourselves" (17). To reject these limits is the work of the uncalled, who looks for validation outside recognition-based forms of protest and white validation. Black theology and Black liberation begin with redefining the most important thing: what it means to be Black. Cone advocates for the beauty of the Black experience, which becomes a sanctuary of sanity "in an insane environment. . . . Black

soul is not learned; it comes from the totality of black experience, the experience of carving out an existence in a society that says you do not belong" (25).

In the foregoing sections, I have attempted to highlight the generative and multifarious ways in which—in the face of Western Christianity's white supremacist aims of assimilation and dehumanization—African and African American alternative religious traditions have provided the context and space for healing, efficacy, resistance, creativity, and subversive collectivity. I described a figure that exercises an unusual measure of control over his or her position and standing in life, who possesses the ability to liberate while defining and redefining white supremacist conceptions of value over their being. This figure of the uncalled is rejected, undervalued, and denied access socially and politically to white life; yet he or she does not register this lack of recognition by whites as a lack of his or her own humanity, worth, or generative capability to create new worlds and new meanings. Self-defining and defending, the figures of the uncalled pursue a different path to freedom than recognition-based forms of protest—one that is inward directed, empowering, and enabling.

After surveying a brief history of Black spiritual beliefs, I covered several theories of recognition to stress the point that rather than overturning oppressive structures, settler-state violence, and control—calls for recognition merely reinforce those structures and maintain the cycle of oppression. The main thrust of this paper so far has been the need to redirect efforts of liberation inward and to shine a light on the possibilities of healing and empowerment that are available within Black collective, already existing modes of being. An effective model of protest not only refuses to allow

states of domination to define the parameters of engagement, but also depends on the radical Black self-definitions of those who do not feel the need to be called.

***Section II***

Wright's *Native Son* and Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* are two novels—published forty years apart—that address and illustrate the two critical threads this section comprises—the limits of recognition and the wholeness available in the heterodoxies of the uncalled. Both of these threads are invested in a remedy. *Native Son,* represents the popular and problematic strategies of recognition-based protest and their limits, while *The Salt Eaters* highlights the alternative—an alternative found in the multifarious noncanonical Black religious and spiritual practices described in the first section. What is at stake in studying Black religious heterodoxy and particularly uncalling more closely in *The Salt Eaters* are the liberatory possibilities of wholeness, healing, empowerment, and creativity that are ignored when freedom struggles cling to the liberal politics of recognition.

***Native Son***

*Native Son* is the 1930s story of Bigger Thomas that makes visible, I think, the strong desire for and subsequent problem with recognition as a model for liberation. The events that lead to the most explicit moment of recognition-based protest in the novel are likely already well known to students and scholars of African American literature. Therefore, I do not provide an extended summary of the text but point out that the

protagonist, Bigger Thomas, was a poor 20-year-old Black man living on the Southside of Chicago in the 1930s. Through a series of poor choices and in the face of economic, racial, and societal pressures, he kills a white woman and is convicted of murder.

Wright seeks to warn white Americans about the danger of not taking seriously the reality of race relations in the U.S. He also seems to highlight the inevitability of Black violence as a response to longstanding systemic structures of injustice and oppression. Connecting the then-contemporary dehumanization of African Americans back to the aftermath of the Civil War and slavery, Wright portrays a festering psychological wound prepped to turn into a physical infection. In other words, after so many years of abuse, Black folk have suppressed and found ways to hide their pain primarily through passivity, self-deception, and duplicity. However, as this novel suggests, something else is bubbling at the surface and waiting to spill over.

My interest in this text centers around the events that take place after Bigger is caught and is awaiting trial: his relationship with his white communist lawyer, Mr. Boris Max; and Max's long speech to the judge and court in Bigger's defense that appears to be the moment Wright takes to speak directly to white readers—laying out his case for how terrible it is to be Black in the U.S. and why they must understand Bigger's perspective, sympathize, and have mercy. Above all else, it is this moment for me that makes clear Wright's call for white recognition, making the novel every bit of what James Baldwin labeled protest fiction.

I frame my reading of this novel very much in terms of its being an example of recognition-based forms of protest and, through the lens Baldwin offers in *Notes of a*

*Native Son,* as a zealous yet reductionist take on Black life in America with the presupposition that "black is a terrible color with which to be born into the world" (Baldwin, 30)—an observation that plays into white fears and Black stereotypes of admonishing white people to beware. Wright, in his 1937 directive *Blueprint for Negro Writing* seems to convey even then his apparent desire for white recognition when he writes of earlier Black writers and their reception by white people. Although many Black folk praised these exceptional writers, that positive reception was overshadowed by the lack of white "serious criticism" or recognition that he lamented and saw as paramount (Wright/Fabre, 37).

In *Notes of a Native Son,* Baldwin argues of Wright's *Native Son* that it is but a continuation of the protest fiction found in *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* Baldwin writes that this kind of protest is unnecessary and overly sentimental. Rather than battling to be seen as human by whites, Baldwin suggests that Black folk ought to accept that they already are human. The failure of the protest novel for Baldwin and of recognition for me "lies in its rejection of life, the human being, the denial of his beauty, dread, power, in its insistence that it is his categorization alone which is real and which cannot be transcended" (Baldwin, 23). Recognition-based protest puts too high a premium on white definitions and acceptance that end up—at least in the case of Bigger—influencing the way Black folk see themselves. Baldwin insists that the most tragic thing about Bigger was not the brutality he suffered at the hands of whites, but that he accepted his calling from a theology that constrained him to the subhuman, a secular yet divine birthright that denied him life and sought to define his being (23). Instead of living in the beauty and freedom

of self-definition and affirmation, many Black folk stay trapped, preoccupied by perceptions of those who benefit from their oppression.

In *Native Son,* Max's desperate appeal comes after he insistently probes Bigger in his holding cell for insights and clues regarding how he felt and why he did what he did. Showing a genuine and fervent interest in Bigger, Max represents that "good" white person who "gets it," recognizes Bigger, and wants to help convince other white folks of the deplorable social, economic, and racial circumstances that contributed to Bigger's acts of rape and multiple homicides. Claiming that this trial "touches the destiny of an entire nation" (382), Max casts Bigger as representative of a larger social problem and asks for life in prison rather than the death penalty for Bigger. Yet, for all of Max's conviction, his protest fails.

After the judge inquires regarding Max's readiness to proceed, Max replies that he is, stands us, clears his throat, and addresses the court with great earnestness (Wright, 382): "My plea is for more than one man and one people. . . . [I]f we can encompass the life of this man and find out what has happened to him . . . perhaps we shall find the key to our future (Wright, 382). Max wants to make visible to the judge Bigger's humanity and motives: "Let me, Your Honor, explain further the meaning of Bigger Thomas' life" (Wright, 393). Bigger's future depends on the judge's recognition.

In another moment, Max implores the judge: "Consider, Your Honor, the peculiar position of this boy. He comes of a people who have lived under queer conditions of life, conditions thrust outside the normal circle of our civilization" (Wright, 393-4). Here, the "queer conditions" are imagined only in a negative way—as if being outside the normal

circle of white civilization could only be a bad thing, as if heterodox Black religiosities and uncalling do not offer a variety of liberatory and alternative ways of being in the world that call into question the "facts of life" Max is bemoaning. This "outside" I imagine as a place where Black folk are able to create, heal, and take control over how they are defined; a place where they do not need to be *civilized* in order to be recognized—not a space that solely drives them to murder.

Yet, I wonder if oppression is not simply further accomplished by looking to the oppressor for recognition: "You cannot kill this man, Your Honor, for we have made it plain that we do not recognize that he lives! So I say, 'Give him life!'" (Wright, 404). Max sees the remedy to being thrust "outside" as the inclusion that comes from the judge and other white folks understanding how bad it is, how they are responsible, and how their own fate is linked to those they hate. Bigger's life is in the court's hands because he has committed a crime. It could be argued that Wright intended that charge to extend beyond the courtroom.

Seeing oneself through the eyes of the oppressor clearly has toxic effects. And if, as Max later suggests, Bigger is "starved from a lack of self-realization" (Wright, 399), why is it necessary for the judge to understand this in order for Bigger to apprehend it. Alas, Bigger operates in Max's speech and Wright's novel as a threat of what could come if the "twelve million" other "Negroes" (Wright, 399) are not recognized and allowed to enter into the fellowship of the *civilized*—or more accurately, the called. Max concludes with a final passionate appeal: "I say, Your Honor, give this boy his life" (Wright, 405).

Bigger's life, here, like recognition is something to be granted and bestowed on the terms of those in power. Those terms do not confer equality; and even if they did, it would not result in liberation or healing. For, the modality of white civilization is itself an oppressive and violent construct. Black folks, according to Max, exist in the "outside"; and due to extended exposure to an oppressive ecology, they suffer from a lack of recognition and inclusion. I would argue that even if included, it is an inclusion into a way of being that denies Black life; and even if recognized, the structures of oppression and power will not have changed. In a sense, Max frames Bigger not as an uncalled figure but as one inhabiting a space of uncalling. This is a negative thing for Max and by extension for Wright. Max's speech begs for calling, and though his cries for calling/recognition ultimately fail, I do not read that as a conscious endorsement of what I mean by the value of uncalling and the heterodoxies of the uncalled. For that, I turn to *The Salt Eaters*. I omit what one might refer to as the called preacher in *Native Son* because he did not display the characteristics of the other uncalled figures from the other novels. In fact, that was not my intention with my reading of Native Son in the first place. Instead, many things and characters were omitted purposely as I was focused on Max's speech and how that represented a kind of Black protest that was bound up in white state-based recognition, and how that was a pattern and problem in prior Black liberation struggles.

***The Salt Eaters***

Bambara's experimental 1980 novel *The Salt Eaters* is more than just a literary example of what an alternative to recognition-based protest looks like; it is a text that troubles not only outward drives for white settler-state sanctioned inclusion and acceptance, but also the problematic patriarchal ways in which Black protest has historically organized itself around charismatic male leadership, or "race men," as a model for seeking social justice while ignoring the numerous contributions and leadership of Black women. Therefore, any formulation of Black protest or strategy for liberation that does not take into account a Black feminist critique of intraracial power inequities (such as Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*) is not liberatory at all. In fact, one cannot investigate figures of the uncalled without looking first to Black women, such as *The Salt Eaters'* Minnie Ransom and Velma Henry, because it is here that we see truly noncanonical, nonpatriarchal, non-Western practices of creating new worlds, new definitions, and ways of being that resist and exist in spite of and outside of white supremacist conceptions of humanity.

At the intersection between Black protest and Black religiosity lies the unacknowledged contributions of Black women. In "Black Theology and the Black Woman," Grant maintains that "[b]y self-appointment, or by the sinecure of a male-dominated society, Black men have [spoken] for the entire Black community, male and female. In a sense, Black men's acceptance of the patriarchal model is logical and to be expected" (Wilmore/Cone, 325-6). Thus, as many mainstream Black churches ignore the residual white supremacist values bound up in patriarchy, many Black women do and

have operated within institutions that denied them the very equality and recognition for which they fought. It is out of these very exclusionary practices that many Black women—including Bambara's Velma Henry and Minnie Ransom—began to inhabit alternative formulations of religious expression and organization.

*The Salt Eaters* is a story about wellness—wellness not only of the protagonist, but also of a larger Black collective—that provides a rich place to discover what self-affirming, self-defining healing for Black folks just might look like. The novel begins with a healing session taking place between mystical healer Minnie Ransom, who I argue is a figure of the uncalled (a kind of spiritual conjurer) operating out of what I have termed heterodox Black religiosities; and discouraged social activist Velma Henry after Velma's attempted suicide. Velma is brought to her breaking point after many years of fighting for civil rights and against racism and sexism within the social movements and other relationships of which she was a part, and dealing with a variety of family difficulties. Velma finds herself seated on a stool across from Minnie in a public room of the Claybourne community infirmary.

Reluctant to participate, Velma retreats back into several internal dialogues and flashbacks. The disorienting and disjointed structure of the novel and the shifts in point of view reflect the distressed mindset of the protagonist and leaves the reader to press his or her way through the narrative just as Velma with the help of Minnie will find her way to healing. Minnie Ransom is accompanied and assisted in her session by an ancestor figure and spiritual guide named Old Wife whom only she can see. Having attended but later left a traditional Bible seminary sometime prior, Minnie Ransom is an African American

spiritual practitioner who operates within and outside of normative and hegemonic Christian belief systems to form her own construction of religiosity. In tune with the invisible realm, Minnie is able to marshal supernatural forces to carve out a subversive collectivity that makes possible new forms of efficacy, liberation, and healing.

*The Salt Eaters* begins with a question, a question that strikes at the heart of what an alternative to recognition-based forms of protest is, that is, a journey inward. Minnie asks Velma, “Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?” (Bambara, 3). The question implies that the power of healing, the power to be made whole, to be well, lies in the hands of Velma herself. She is confronted with a decision to take responsibility for her wellness; and in taking responsibility, she acknowledges her understanding that she possesses the ability within herself to respond. The question directs her inward and not outward. As the two women sit on stools in the middle of a large room, many at the facility begin to gather around to witness the healing.

Minnie is described as “the fabled healer of the district" (Bambara, 3), the “legendary spinster of Claybourne" (Bambara, 4). The scene is intense as Minnie Ransom cautions Velma that she must be sure that she wants to be well. As Minnie continues humming and waiting for a reply, the song comes very close to the note or frequency that could “shatter Velma's bones” (Bambara, 4). Confused as to how to proceed, Velma feels out of whack and unsure of what she is supposed to do or say on that stool. All she knows is that she is in Minnie Ransom's hands in the Southwest Community Infirmary (Bambara, 5).

A space of possibility, both frightening and exciting, opens up for Velma. Minnie asks Velma again and again throughout the session as the two sat there locked in spiritual warfare:

> Just so's you're sure, sweetheart, and ready to be healed, cause wholeness is no trifling matter. A lot of weight then you're well (Bambara, 10). . . . And again Minnie Ransom asked, "Are you sure, sweetheart? I'm just not asking is all. . . . Take away the miseries and take away some folks' reason for living" (Bambara, 15-6).

Minnie is described as a mystical and mysterious spiritual figure, a conjurer, an uncalled figure who wields unconventional and supernatural powers. Many watching "privately thought this is one helluva way to conduct a healing" (Bambara, 8). Minnie's ways are subversive: "There seemed to be, many of the visitors concluded, a blatant lack of discipline at the Southwest Community Infirmary that made you suspect the reputation it enjoyed in radical medical circles" (Bambara, 10). The space takes on an oddly religious feel as it is described. The community forming a circle around Velma and Minnie act as a kind of prayer group. The woman's eyes are "as still as water in the baptismal pit, reminding them that she had been there too the day the congregation had stood by waiting for the moving of the water, had shouted when Velma had come through religion" (Bambara, 12). This was certainly a religious experience of a different sort.

An older man later says: "'We all been there, one way or t'other,'" . . . hummed, chanted and was echoed by his twin from the other side of the circle, singing in common meter just like it was church" (Bambara, 16). This unorthodox spiritual gathering is an

example of what I have been calling heterodox Black religiosities—the multifarious spiritual traditions and beliefs created, modified, and interpreted by Black folk since slavery to bring meaning, resistance, and healing to Black lives—a subversive collectivity that exists alongside and in spite of the white supremacist aims of Western Christianity—something between magic and religion, something that troubles the distinction. And Minnie Ransom is an example of what I have termed the figure of the uncalled—an individual who, although not *called* into formal church leadership, is in tune with the invisible realm, who exercises an unusual measure of efficacy over his or her position and standing in life, a figure who possesses the ability to heal and liberate while defining and redefining White supremacist conceptions of value over their being.

Minnie presses Velma again to take responsibility for and control over her healing: "I can feel, sweetheart, that you're not quite ready to dump the shit," Minnie Ransom said, . . . [G]ot to give it all up, the pain, the hurt, the anger and make room for lovely things to rush in and fill you full" (Bambara, 16). Velma Henry "clutched the stool. She felt faint, too faint to ask for a decent chair to sit in. . . . She hadn't the strength. She felt her eyes rolling away" (Bambara, 17). "Release, sweetheart" Minnie said. "Give it all up. Forgive everyone everything. Free them. Free self" (Bambara, 18). Minnie is guiding Velma on a journey inward, on a "telepathic visit with her former self" (Bambara, 18) to an empowerment that comes from within. Velma is hurt. She has been wounded by those she has helped, worked with, and loved.

As Black freedom struggles became increasingly overrun by sexism, and protest planning sessions became a space for male-dominated leadership to grandstand, women

like Velma Henry grew frustrated by the irony: “Like work and no let up.” Velma remembers back to her days as an activist, the days and the pain that led up to her failed suicide attempt. She flashes back to what it was like back then, often going to jail for the struggle and being forgotten and deprioritized by the Black men that they had worked so hard alongside; or how the women would be called in on five-minutes’ notice and expected to not only agree with, but also to pull what the men had already decided was best for the community (Bambara, 25).

Velma sets the men straight in the meeting: “No more hastily called meetings and five-minute commitments and unilaterally drawn-up agenda items. If we’re gonna deal, let’s deal,” (Bambara, 31). She reminds the men that it had been the women who did most of the work. Velma informs the men that they “are all welcome to continue operating as a social club, but not on our time, okay? . . . And from now on, when you want some ‘input,’ don’t call us—we’ll call you” (Bambara, 37). In what appears to be one of the most explicit moments of uncalling for Velma before her session with Minnie, we see that the men’s call, or recognition of the women’s value and humanity, was neither wanted nor needed. Uncalling, then, is less about one's rejection and more about one’s ability to refuse.

Far too many Black religious, social justice, and political protest movements and institutions have for too long benefited from and at the expense of Black women, while male-dominated models of top-down leadership get recorded by history as the preferred way to organize; women like Velma, Ruby, and even Minnie (to some extent while in seminary) are pushed to the margins. Doubly bound by race and gender, these women do

not surrender to despair; but like the women of *The Salt Eaters,* they build something new; looking inward for recognition, empowerment, and healing, they celebrate being figures of the uncalled. In fact, they demand it. As Velma proclaimed: "Don't call us—we'll call you" (Bambara, 37).

For these women, recognition does not represent the possibility of liberation but the validation of racist and patriarchal structures of oppression. Minnie Ransom is trying to help Velma recognize and release a terrible weight. In seeking recognition, not only does one give his or her power away to another, but one is also perpetually bound to that other and the other's definition of oneself. Freedom comes when one pursues life absent the need to be recognized. Once Velma snapped back to the present, she heard Minnie's voice: "Quit wrasslin, sweetheart, or you may go under. I'm throwing you a lifeline. Don't be too proud to live" (Bambara, 42).

I am reading Minnie Ransom as a kind of uncalled figure—an African American spiritual practitioner with special access to the invisible realm and supernatural power in the visible. Operating out of heterodox Black religiosities, Minnie as a figure of the uncalled not only has no need for outward forms of state-based or patriarchal recognition, but she also moves both in and out of (with and against) orthodox mainstream Christianity to create new worlds, meanings, and methodologies for healing. One of the mystical, supernatural, extraspiritual things that Minnie is able to do in *The Salt Eaters* is call upon the invisible realm where, like a conjurer, she can "manipulate unseen forces or "work the spirits'" (Chireau, 21).

Minnie summons an ancestor named Old Wife to assist her in the healing ceremony. Old Wife responds to her charge to Velma:

> "Speakin of wrasslin with pride, Min—"
>
> "What you say?" Minnie Ransom hadn't been aware of her spirit guide's presence, or of her own drift elsewhere:
>
> "Say she can't hear you, Min. Don't even see you. Henry gal off somewhere tracking herself" (Bambara, 42).

The two go back and forth like old friends about Velma's seemingly stubborn position towards her healing: "She's one of Oshun's witches, I suspect. What's Oshun's two cents worth on the matter? . . . I don't know about the two cents cause I strictly do not mess with haints, Min. I've always been a good Christian" (Bambara, 43-4).

Oshun is a reference to the religion of Santería (a Spanish word that means worship of saints) and the worship of Orishas. Yet Old wife insists that she has always been a good Christian. The distinctions between Christianity and other religions and spiritual belief systems were oftentimes not mutually exclusive and even complementary. Blacks Americans were spiritually pragmatic and capable of shifting between systems such as Conjure and Christianity to access the supernatural world (Chireau, 24-5). This fluidity between Christianity and Conjure is seen in the previous dialogue between Old Wife and Minnie Ransom. Through this heterodox Black religiosity, Minnie recognizes no difference between the seen and the unseen. The visible and the invisible worlds are not metaphysically or ontologically distinct; they are, rather, a matter of perception (Clark, 75). Minnie as a spiritual practitioner and figure of the uncalled understands this

as she communes with Old Wife. What she appears to struggle with is how the dead are not dead (Clark, 75). To some extent, Old Wife's state of existence confuses even Minnie. So, she asks:

> "Old Wife, what are you but a haint?"
>
> "I'ma servant of the Lord, beggin your pardon."
>
> "I know that. But you a haint. You dead ain't you?"
>
> "There is no death in spirit, Min, I keep telling you. Why you so hard head? You and that gal on the stool cut from the same cloth" (Bambara, 62).

Old Wife functions in the narrative not as a dead but a living ancestor, a powerful spiritual presence to which both Minnie Ransom and Velma in a way are connected. Breaking down the boundaries between self and other, the visible and the invisible, Minnie leans on Old Wife for direction after the healing session began to drag on. Minnie asks: "What ought I do about the Henry gal, Old Wife? Don't you know? Don't you? Ain't you omniscient yet?" (Bambara, 49).

Minnie's insistence that Old Wife help her and provide some guidance is in line with the Indigenous African thought systems concerning the role and abilities of the ancestors. Soliciting the ancestors can affect reality and healing in our spatial/temporal order (Clark, 75-6). Yet, Minnie also prays to the Lord: "Lord, with feeble praise and bold requests, don't turn me down now, gotta help me and answer my prayers. . . . Sweet Jesus" (Bambara, 63).

These supernatural appeals, both magical and religious, show a departure from and affinity for universally held Christian traditions (Chireau, 67). Pulling from both

Clark and Chireau's work, this exchange between Minnie and Old Wife is an example of the merging of African-inspired practices and Protestantism, or what I have repeatedly called heterodox Black religiosities. It is an example of the creative power that the figure of the uncalled has to redefine, reinterpret, and reject that which has been both imposed and denied. Old Wife warns: "Be careful, Min Ransom, you heading for a fall. I'm not even sure you deserve your gift" (Bambara, 63)—reminding Minnie to have faith in the new worlds and meaning she has created; for there were days "when she had not trusted the gift" (Bambara, 53)—when canonical religious institutions failed to recognize her, when recognition mattered, when even her family called her crazy and were unable to recognize her gift for what it was, a gift. (Bambara, 51-2).

As a figure of the uncalled, Minnie Ransom has a kind of freedom. She declares to Old Wife: "Now here I am and there I am in all I am, free to be anywhere at all in the universe" (Bambara, 55). She is a figure who could exercise an unusual measure of efficacy over her position and standing in life. Her humanity is no longer defined by others but by the generative currents of self-love that she has been trying all day to share and let flow to Velma. This model for healing is a journey inward and through: through the pain and confusion that accompanies oppression, dehumanization, and injustice. It is a choice and a chance at renewal. The power is now in Velma's hands: "You'll have to choose, sweetheart. Choose your own cure" (Bambara, 103). Affirming Velma's power, Minnie exclaims: "There's nothing that stands between you and perfect health, sweetheart. . . . Can you afford to be whole? . . . Can you afford it, is what I'm asking you, sweetheart?" (Bambara, 104, 106).

Unlike Bigger's fate in *Native Son,* life or death in Velma's case does not depend on the expressed understanding and recognition of white folks. The choice to be whole is hers. Minnie and Old Wife can guide and encourage, but the decision is hers. This kind of spiritual empowerment made visible by the figure of the uncalled inside and through heterodox Black religiosities is what allows not only for a fuller sense of liberation, but also for new ways of being. Velma must let go of hate and embrace love: "Whatever it was that had fallen away was showing her another way to be in the world" (Bambara, 106).

Self-love is the key that unlocks the heavy burden and largely unacknowledged chain that binds and blinds many freedom fighters to the desire for recognition—the key to a truly liberatory modality of protest. The "truth was in one's own people and the key was to be centered in the best of one's own traditions" (Bambara, 169). Moreover, the radical Black sociality made possible by self-affirming and self-defining Black cultural practices draws from the new meanings and life worlds created in spaces of uncalled, nonsanctioned, undervalued spiritual healing and restoration, to connect the free in a mutual harmony of love—a subversive collectivity that then breaks down the very boundaries of the self. Once Velma let go, Minnie was finally able to dance Velma's dance, match her beat, echo her pitch, and know her frequency like her own. Velma, now certain that she wanted to be healed, found a new way of being in the world (Bambara, 48).

Rather than a liberal politics of recognition that inflames differences and reinforces oppressive structures of power, nonmutual relationships, and limited freedoms

bestowed on unequal terms, one alternative might be found on the journey inward to wholeness. Such would be a protest not of the denial or rejection of the individual but of the preceding act of violence—the production of that individual (and the myriad ways we are complicit in that act). In *The Salt Eaters,* Minnie is already free; and with the help of Old Wife, she helps guide Velma to choose to be free, healed, and whole, in love. In other words, love is the unending and ever expanding energy of life that broadcasts its signal into the world. It is our choice, then, to let go of what holds us down in order to allow our frequency to rise and match the signal, thus making us one not only with the energy of life but also with all those on the same frequency—*wholeness.*

During my archival research at the Spelman archives I ran across an article by Janet Zandy titled "Toni Cade Bambara on Black Literature and Black Religion". In it Zandy highlights Bambara's definition of religion, She states that for Bambara "Religion is reconnecting with the original regenerative source for the purpose of transforming the self, and in that process, transforming the world". Bambara learned this from her grandmother's kitchen--her "first university". The process of transformation for her involves a "re-naming" and a "reeducation" (Zandy). Something Velma and Minnie engage in at the community center. Likewise, such a renaming and transformation also takes place in the next chapter with Pilate's character in *Song of Solomon*. We need to recognize ourselves. But, first I think we need to be sure if we want to be well.

## Chapter 2: Recognition's Co-Pilot: Mystical Earrings in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

I begin this chapter with an analysis of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* that provides a close reading of Pilate Dead's character as a practitioner of what Yvonne P. Chireau would call a kind of "magical spirituality" in the African American experience. In this chapter, I extend my understanding of the uncalled figure to the realm of Black spiritual practices and the representations of conjuring contained therein. Chireau suggests that the conjure is a figure that can interact with an invisible reality. A sacred realm (6-12). This in-between figure, this spiritual medium, leads to a kind of "spiritual efficacy," what I refer to in Chapter One as the "uncalled figure." I draw my theoretical methodology in this chapter from Chireau, as well as other scholars of the Black spiritual tradition such as Theophus H. Smith, Noel Leo Erskine, Jawanza Eric Clark, and Tracey E. Hucks. Focusing on Black spiritual practices and conjuring traditions, I will attempt to make the case for, and illustrate a kind of healing potential for power, and freedom that has and continues to exist within select communities of Black sociality and religiosity that offers an alternative to current and popular forms of protest and liberation efforts that are bound up in the recognition of Black humanity.

My intellectual gratitude in this chapter and the forth extends to the work of Black and women of color feminist theorists as well. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, Saidiya V. Hartman, Chela Sandoval, Audre Lorde not only draw out the importance of, and make the connection between Pilate and what I term the "uncalled figure," but also consider Black protest at large and in general the importance of Black women's writings, voices,

and methodologies in the radical tradition. As Pilate models the qualities and freedom needed to let go of lack and embrace wholeness, she also is an example of what it looks like to by surrounded by, and the danger of more prevalent capitalists and patriarchal modes of racial uplift and *progress*. If we accept my initial argument that longing and calls for external state-based recognition stifles freedom for Black folk, then what may be even more detrimental for liberation efforts is a continued denial or rejection of Black women's unique positionality to oppression, resistance, and theories of healing. For far too long has white supremacist logics of gender inequality dictated the outlook and strategies of Black freedom fighters. I will read the above theories alongside *Songs of Solomon* and Pilate's character to establish a through-line that argues there exist a magical, spiritual, internal, yet social, innately feminist path to wholeness outside of recognition.

The next chapter will consider the notion of recognition through a critical engagement with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man,* although it is not as simple a juxtaposition as *Native Son* and *The Salt Eaters'* relationship to recognition and protest. In the next chapter *Invisible Man* will be read as participating in a similar corrective and educational effort as *Native Son* an example of recognition-based models of liberation. Though Ellison was very aware of and sought to avoid writing another typical racial protest novel, he investigates issues of high visibility, discrimination, and loneliness. Hoping to give his protagonist more intellectual depth and the narrative a more universal human appeal, Ellison contributes volumes to the topic of visibility and recognition and as such is a text I must carefully consider in my own intervention. Continuing with the

formulations of Hegel and Fanon from the first chapter, I will attempt to show the limitations of Ellison's approach and the need for another strategy.

**What's Inside the Earring?**

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* provides me with my second example of what I have termed the figure of the uncalled. She is a figure who exhibits a particular sense of freedom, power, and spiritual/magical qualities as they move through the world, a figure that comes from an unsanctioned mixture of Christianity, Conjure, and Mysticism. Thus, she is a figure who mobilizes her spiritual power for healing, protection, and self defense (Chireau, 12). Pilate Dead, though seemingly a minor character as the auntie of the protagonist Macon "Milkman" Dead III, is my central focus in reading this novel and the liberatory possibilities she represents.

What is otherwise understood as yet another brilliant and compelling African American coming of age story by Morrison, *Song of Solomon* for me offers an alternative to the problems presented by the contemporary liberal politics of recognition. Pilate--through a series of rejections and failures of being recognized--learns to walk, live, and thrive outside such rubrics of acceptance. This does not prevent her, however, from seeking out moments and spaces of Black sociality, self/mutual recognition, and quasi/non sanctioned forms of religiosity. Her presence bookends the narrative, however her presence also, in many ways shapes and influences (directly and indirectly) the actions of the other characters (especially the protagonist's). In what follows, I highlight

specific moments from the novel that show how Pilate is indeed an uncalled figure, and how this might matter in a larger social justice context.

*Song of Solomon* begins with Pilate Dead singing an old family song "Sugarman," in a crowd of town's folk beneath Mercy Hospital as beleaguered insurance agent Robert Smith jumps to his death. It is here that the possibility of African American flight is both normalized--as no one attempted to stop him from committing suicide, instead they watched for him to take off--and foreclosed as he eventually plunges to his death. His death, marks the same moment of the protagonist's (Milkman) birth. The scene is described as a positive impromptu Black social gathering, "It was nice and gay there for a while" (5). The crowd went back and forth between looking up, then looking down. Some helped pick up artificial flower petals that fell in the snow, while others watched Mr. Smith. Women, men, and small children were all in attendance. The scene than takes on a more religious tone as Pilate starts singing what seems like an old spiritual of hymn. The lyrics to the song, however, isn't the first thing of which the reader is made aware. Instead, we are made aware of Pilate's appearance, difference, class, and comfortability with her state. Referred to without name, the narrator describes Pilate, "The singer, standing at the back of the crowd, was as poorly dressed as the doctor's daughter was well dressed. . .The singing woman wore a knitted navy cap pulled far down over her forehead. She had wrapped herself up in an old quilt instead of a winter coat" (5-6). Pilate here is depicted as an outsider. She is spatially an outsider, standing away from the crowd, and is wearing clothes that are inappropriate for the weather and for the occasion. Unlike the doctor's daughter who is cared for, Pilate's character conforms more to that of

the witch figure in European fairy tales. This suggests she cares very little for the opinions, or the validation of others, and part of her power derives from her independence from patriarchal forms of care and control. Her focus was on the man about to fly, "Her head cocked to one side, her eyes fixed on Mr. Robert Smith, she sang in a powerful contralto:

> O Sugarman done fly away
>
> Sugarman done gone
>
> Sugarman cut across the sky
>
> Sugarman gone home....

A few of the fifty or so people gathered there nudged each other and sniggered. Others "listened as though it were the helpful and defining piano music in a silent movie" (6). As Pilate endures the smothered laughter of many in the crowd, her presence signifies a kind of power.

I have defined the figure of the uncalled as a noncanonical African American spiritual practitioner in tune with the invisible realm and supernatural forces made available by heterodox Black religiosities. Operating within a radical Black sociality of subversive collectivity, this figure exercises an unusual measure of efficacy over his or her position and standing in life and possesses the ability to heal and liberate while defining and redefining white supremacist conceptions of value over his or her being. This rings true for Pilate here as well as much more throughout the novel. This singing

and her worn and tattered portrayal so early on, foreshadows Pilate Dead as a kind of confident priestess, or witch.

During plantation slavery in the U.S., a scene like this may have been understood as a connection to, or outgrowth of African spiritual traditions and practiced. Albert J. Raboteau argues that, "It was not possible to maintain the rites of worship, the priesthood, or the 'national' identities which were the vehicles and supports for African theology and cult organization. Nevertheless, even as the gods of Africa gave way to the God of Christianity, the African heritage of singing, dancing, spirit possession, and magic continued to influence Afro-American spirituals, ring shouts, and folk beliefs. That this was so is evidence of the slaves ability not only to adapt to new contexts but to do so creatively" (Raboteau, 92). This song Pilate sang would later prove to mark just such a connection and adaptation of African and African American slave traditions.

Moreover, her ragged attire and seemed ability to be at ease with external values and criticisms points to yet another one of Raboteau's observations about the freedom and impact found in such religious/ quasi-religious spaces. He argued that, slave religion had a this-worldly impact, not only in leading some slaves to acts of external rebellion, but also in helping slaves to assert and maintain a sense of personal value--even of ultimate worth" (Raboteau, 318). Though this is not an explicitly religious gathering, the singing and Pilate's ability to maintain a sense of personal value amidst public ridicule and contempt sign post her as an uncalled figure with this-worldly impact.

There are several moments in the Novel that illustrate Pilate as an uncalled figure and the liberatory spaces I term heterodox Black religiosities. Pilate's name as well as

those of her daughter, granddaughter, and nieces were names pulled blindly from a Bible, as was the tradition. Her father's grief at his wife's death in childbirth and his inability to read lead him to copy out "the group of letters out on a piece of brown paper; copied, as illiterate people do, every curlicue, arch, and bend in the letters, and presented it to the midwife" (18), what seemed to him a strong name.

There was push back, however, " . . .Baby name Pilate." her father proclaimed. "Jesus, have mercy," replied the midwife. "Where you going with that piece of paper?" asked Macon. "It's going back where it came from. Right in the Devil's flames." exclaimed the midwife. "Give it here. It come from the Bible. It stays in the Bible." Pilate's father, here, assigns a sacred status and meaning to this paper, name, and the Bible from which it came. The value does not remain singular, however, in its religious or spiritual associations and practices. What might be easily understood as a mainstream tradition or allegiance to a certain dominate Western Christianity, suddenly takes on attributes of other ritual actions of African and Afro-American religions, such as conjure as the name becomes a charm. The name stayed "there, until the baby girl turned twelve and took it out, folded it up into a tiny knot and put it in a little brass box, and strung the entire contraption through her left earlobe." (18-19). Albert J. Raboteau argues in *Slave Religion* that such ritual performances constitute a critical modality of healing. The use of such charms, "and counter charms, to harm or to ward off harm, is an essential trait of conjuring. Materials of great power for 'fixing' or conjuring someone are hair and nail clippings, a piece of clothing or personal object belonging to the victim, dirt from a

person's footprint, and especially, grave dirt. Powders, roots, and herbs of various sorts are used to cause or to cure illness. . ." (Raboteau, 82).

Not only does this charm continue the connection between conjure and minor Black Christian mythology, but the name is significant in this process too. While also marking Pilate once again as Other, or uncalled. In fact, Pontius Pilate of the Bible was the one responsible for murdering Jesus. She was not named after any of his disciples whom had been called, or any of the prophets. Instead, she was named after a man with no spiritual calling. At the same time her name has the connotation of flight if spelled pilot. This notion of flight signified African and African American slave mythologies that actual flight was possible and could be achieved. Carried out throughout the novel Pilate already embodies what Tracey Hucks describes as an ability to willingly negotiate an amalgam of sacred knowledges that collectively enable them" a "sense of cognitive openness" allowing for "multisourced notions of divine power to coexist in sustaining, fulfilling, and beneficial ways" (Hucks, 227). This unlikely pairing of mixture may at first seem odd, "Yet from slavery days to the present, many African Americans have readily move between Christianity, Conjure, and other forms of supernaturalism with little concern for their purported incompatibility" (Chireau, 16). I argue that Pilate possessed this spiritual openness and efficacy to move back and forth between these traditions as evidenced in the last line of the forward, it gestures to power and freedom Pilate possessed for, "without ever leaving the ground she could fly" (forward). This "'slippage'" in *Song of Solomon*, or the "lived religious space that Charles H. Long calls extra-church and David E. Hall calls extra ecclesial," is an example of what Tracey E.

Hucks argues was some African Americans ability to “created new ways of traditionalizing Yoruba religious cultures in North America" (Hucks, 5). The Bible as sacred object in the context of Western Christianity takes on, simultaneously, the spiritual attributes and power of associated with a “charm” in African conjure culture.

Pilate’s appearance and how it is described to the reader positions her as other, odd, reviled, but also as this liberatory uncalled figure I am attempting to trace throughout this Novel. Highlighting Macon’s perspective, the narrator recalls, “[h]ow far down she had slid since then. She had cut the last thread of propriety. At one time she had been the dearest thing in the world to him. Now she was odd, murky, and worst of all, unkempt” (Morrison 20). I would argue that this depiction is not as negative as it was intended. Instead, it points to a deliberate and liberatory act on Pilate’s part; what Saidiya V. Hartman in *Scenes of Subjection* describes as "[e]xploiting the limits of the permissible, creating transient zones of freedom, ....central features of everyday practice” (Hartman 50). The refashioning of “permitted pleasures in the effort to undermine, transform, and redress the condition of enslavement was consonant with other forms of everyday practice” (Hartman 50). Though this novel does not take place during the period of U.S. chattel slavery Hartman is referencing, it does still make visible a form of resistance often overlooked, evidenced in Pilate’s character, and that is not bound up in external state-based forms of non-mutual recognition. Therefore, the, “everyday practices of the enslaved encompassed an array of tactics such as work slowdowns, feigned illness, unlicensed travel, the destruction of property, theft, self-mutilation, dissimulation, physical confrontation with owners and overseers that document the resistance to slavery.

These small-scale and everyday forms of resistance interrupted, reelaborated, and defied the constraints of everyday life under slavery and exploited openings in the system for the use of the enslaved" (51). For Pilate--and the figure of the uncalled-- her very presence interrupts the societal class and gender norms prescribed when thinking traditional forms of racial uplift, or progress. Her brother here represents white supremacist and patriarchal restrictions and sensibilities of the called, while Pilate in her resistance represents the freedom and self-affirming qualities of the uncalled.

Again, the narrator illustrates the conflict as Pilate was considered by her brother ," [a] regular source of embarrassment, if he would allow it. But he would not allow it. Finally he had told her not to come again until she could show some respect for herself. Could get a real job instead of running a wine house"(Morrison 20). The idea of a "real job" was not Macon's alone. No, it was a strategy of the protestant work ethic and the very notion of calling the uncalled figure rejects. As I have previously defined, the figure of the uncalled is one who resists dogmatic capitalistic notions of *calling* as a way of life that is based on an economic obligation to participate in the production of the individual and in an uncritical work force for fulfillment and acceptance. The figure of the uncalled is rejected, undervalued, and denied access socially and politically to white life—not called on to participate in a relationship of mutual recognition; however, the figure of the uncalled does not register this lack of recognition by whites and the systemic global mechanisms of white supremacy as a lack of his or her own humanity, worth, or generative capability to create meaning and connections among the rest of the uncalled.

Self-defining and defending, the figure of the uncalled is not a utopic figure; it is rather an undertheorized figure already existing in Black literature and social movements.

Hartman elaborates on the beginnings of and connections between this idea of calling and a proper work ethic. She maintains that:

> [in] the effort to implant a rational work ethic, eradicate pedestrian practices of freedom, assuage fears about the free labor system, and ensure the triumph of market relations, missionaries, schoolteachers, entrepreneurs, and other self-proclaimed 'friends of the Negro' took to the South. Through pedagogical manuals, freedmen's schools, and religious instruction, teachers, missionaries, and plantation managers strived to inculcate acquisitive and self-interested ethic that would motivate the formerly enslaved to the dutiful and productive laborers. The indecorous, proud, and seemingly reckless behavior through which the newly emancipated asserted their freedom was to be corrected with proper doses of humility, responsibilities, and restraint. . .(Hartman 129).

Such a relationship to duty, productivity and work clearly has its roots in early and oppressive campaigns to sideline freedom after slavery, and instead instantiate the yoke of bondage under the guise of a proper work ethic and calling. Pilate's ability to live and operate outside of such expectations, in "wine houses" and "unkempt" spaces, exhibits an alternative value system.

For Macon, his embarrassment of his sister is evidence of the successful implantation of a "rational work ethic" and an investment in economic recognition. For it is the rich white men he does business with, whose opinions hold sway over him and

inform his expectations of Pilate. He “trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank. . . discovering that this raggedy bootlegger was his sister”(20). As religious, class, and patriarchal standards intersect Macon exclaims, “‘Why can’t you dress like a woman?’ (20). Standing by the stove, Macon begins criticizing Pilate from head to toe. He asks, ‘What’s that sailor’s cap doing on your head? Don’t you have stockings? What are you trying to make me look like in this town?’ Though he himself owned property and ‘lived in the big house on Not Doctor Street’” (20). He was terrified--due in part to his strong desire to for non-mutual recognition--that he “had a sister who had a daughter but no husband, and that daughter had a daughter but no husband. A collection of lunatics who made wine and sang in the streets ‘like common street women! Just like common street women!’ (Morrison 20).

According to Hartman, this aversion--and repulsion of his sister--actually stems from the desire to be seen as a citizen. He was guided by a series of imperatives such as, “be industrious, economical, useful, productive, chaste, kind, respectful to former masters, good Christians, and dutiful citizens" (Hartman 129). This did and could not apply to Pilate. Nor did it matter to her. However, for Macon her presence was a reminder of his own very tentative relationship to white acceptance and citizenship. Hartman continues to explain, “the full privileges of citizenship awaited those who realized the importance of proper conduct and applied the principles of good management to all aspects of their lives, from personal hygiene to household expenditures" (Hartman 129).

Coulthard in *Red Skin, White Masks* explains that freedom must come outside of such oppressive external markers of affirmation and worth. And instead, building off of Fanon's work argues that--like Pilate--the colonized must . . .struggl[e] to work through their alienation/subjection, [and] against the objectifying gaze and assimilative lure of colonial recognition" (Coulthard 43). Therefore, as Macon is shown in the Novel by Morrison to fall victim to such an assimilative lure, and his character fails to reach true freedom. I would argue that he represents the foreclosure of any liberatory possibilities recognition-based forms of protest contain. The failed model is juxtaposed with Pilate's and what I have termed the figure of the uncalled. For each of the economic, gendered, and spiritual departures Pilate makes, she represents a model of freedom that is rooted in the internal and the self-affirming practices all too critical to a more liberatory form of Black protest. Working through both Fanon and Fanon's handling of Hegel, Coulthard recognizes that the real change and freedom comes as a "self-initiated process"(Coulthard 43). Freedom was, at first, an internal matter what Fanon called, "'the colonized psycho affective equilibrium.'"

According to Coulthard's reading of Fanon, "the colonized must initiate the process of decolonization by first recognizing themselves as free, dignified, and distinct contributors to humanity. Unlike Nietzsche, however, Fanon equated this process of self-recognition with the praxis undertaken by the slave in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit, which Fanon saw as illustrating the necessity on the part of the oppressed to 'turn away' from their other oriented master-dependency, and to instead struggle for freedom on their own terms and in accordance with their own values" (Coulthard 43). It is on this internal

front that Pilate represents not only a struggle for freedom but an achievement of freedom. One that exists, but is seldom observed, or theorized in contemporary liberation plights.

This freedom, this efficacy, that Pilate exemplifies by detaching, from notions of recognition, and of calling, or duty--both in terms of the trappings of hegemonic mainstream white Western Christianities (their raced and gendered ideals of the proper and the acceptable), and economic pursuits laden with capitalistic mandates for labor and productivity--is both embarrassing to Macon, but also extremely and perplexingly alluring at the same time. I would argue that Macon represents the limitations of recognition-based forms of protest, or of the happiness and wholeness that is ultimately possible when seeking non mutual state-based forms of recognition, and the eventual cruelty that arises from attempting liberation using the master's tools. Though he owns several properties and has a nice car and lots of money what he lacks is a close and meaningful relationship with his wife and children, the local Black community, a stable and mutually respected standing with the white bankers with whom he does business with, or even a fraction of the joy and peace that floats like unburdened melodies from Pilate's house.

After a walk, Macon arrives at Pilate's house. He is drawn there by some force that highlights his emptiness, and the emptiness of the life he had been living; a life bound up in calling. Her house is described as the opposite of progress, dark and backward. The narrator tells it this way,

> He crossed a yard and followed a fence that led into Darling Street where Pilate lived in a narrow single-story house whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground. She had no electricity because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas. At night she and her daughter lit the house with candles and kerosene lamps; they warmed themselves and cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well and lived pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road" (27). Yet it is important to recognize that he is still drawn.

In spite of his life long, "drive for wealth" (28), revulsion of, and separation from his sister, Macon was drawn to Pilate's house and its melody. As he thougtht about returning home he remembers to him self that, "There was no music there, and tonight he wanted just a bit of music—from the person who had been his first caring for" (28). From Pilate who I am arguing is an uncalled figure, and at her house which represents the kind of radical Black sociality made possible in spaces of heterodox Black religiosities and minor Black spiritual practices. The pull was powerful, "He turned back and walked slowly toward Pilate's house. They were singing some melody that Pilate was leading" (29). This suggests some kind of makeshift church experience. Pilate is rendered as a kind of unsanctioned preacher, or choir director.

In the company of her daughter Reba and her grand daughter Hagar, 'the other two were taking up and building on. . .[h]er powerful contralto, Reba's piercing soprano

in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar, who must be about ten or eleven now, pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet" (29). This was a space of healing and sociallity that had the power to satisfy the inherent feeling lack that Macon suffered from. As he surrendered to the sound, "Macon moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico" (29). Just by witnessing this he was transformed and transported internally to a place of freedom. Standing near the window, hidden by the dark, "he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight" (29).

The narrator makes the reader aware of Macon's perspective in this moment. And, instead of some normative maternal gender role, or motherly duty he expected from her Pilate's freedom and power was presented as childish or hedonistic. He knew, "it was not food she was stirring, for she and her daughters ate like children. Whatever they had a taste for. No meal was ever planned or balanced or served. Nor was there any gathering at the table" (29). This is a clear rejection of white patriarchal standards and values. Pilate might, "bake hot bread and each one of them would eat it with butter whenever she felt like it. Or there might be grapes, left over from the winemaking, or peaches for days on end. . .They ate what they had or came across or had a craving for. Profits from their wine-selling evaporated like sea water in a hot wind—going for junk jewelry for Hagar, Reba's gifts to men, and he didn't know what all" (29).. This kind of presumed carelessness and lack of responsibility is evidence of deliberate resistance and alternative formulation surrounding modern conceptions of Black freedom. What Hartman wrote of

when referring to the resistance practices of enslaved African –Americans on plantations and their descendants; the, "reelaborating [of] innocent amusements"(Hartman 50). Notions of productivity and responsibility only aid white supremist aims domination. So, though only in close proximity to such a space, "Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead could not leave" (29). What is odd about this attraction, is that is also tied to revoltion. Macon doesn't want to be seen with his sister's, but doesn't wanna leave her yard. This duality of desire is not unique to the notions of calling and uncalling, however this inner battle I read as illustrating the woefully inadequate and distracting nature of recognition-based forms of protest as a pathway towards freedom and wholeness.

Macon's complicated aversion to Pilate and what she represents is also passed down to his son Milkman. Asking Guitar what it is like in Pilate's house, Milkman is more curious than cautious after his father's warnings. "All those unbelievable but entirely possible stories about his father's sister—the woman his father had forbidden him to go near—had both of them spellbound" (36). Again, Pilate is portrayed as dangerous, yet appealing due to the power she moves around the world with. Her inner peace and comfort makes other uncomfortable. With words like "spellbound" Pilate's association with a spiritual, uncalled, or conjure figure is repeated. Macon tells Milkman of her usefulness and alludes to her spiritual connection to another realm, "Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world. Maybe the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55).

This perhaps is one of the starkest comparisons of calling and uncalling. Macon's compulsion to own things, himself, and other people is a weight that prevents wholeness and originates from a desire for recognition. It is also unquenchable.

Where does he get such a notion? If financial empowerment is what brings freedom then why was he so drawn to Pilate's house? It is interesting to note that the freedom he is describing is not only external and based on western capitalistic values, but is contingent upon taking someone else's freedom. This is not the model for true empowerment. Pilate, instead, represents a more constructive path to freedom. Coulthard puts it like this, the empowerment that is derived from this critically self-affirmative and self-transformative ethics of desubjectification must be consciously directed away from the assimilative lure of the statist politics of recognition, and instead he fashioned for our own on-the-ground struggles of freedom" (48). Quoting bell hooks, Coulthard highlights that such a project would "require that we stop being so preoccupied with looking 'to that other for recognition'; instead we should be 'recognizing ourselves and [then seeking to] make contact with all who would engage us in a constructive manner" (48). Not only does Pilate not share her brother's longing for state-based recognition and oppressive economic formulas for liberation, but she also inhabits a supernatural space of resistance. Chireau argues that, "Black Americans utilized conjuring traditions not only because they saw them as a valuable resource for resistance, but because they believed that the supernatural realm offered alternative possibilities for empowerment" (Chireau, 18). It is these alternative possibilities I have argued are evidenced in Pilate's character and in what I am calling the figure of the uncalled, as a model for a more effective path to

wholeness and current Black radical conversations regarding protest and freedom fighting efforts. As I see a majority of our efforts bound up in recognition and purely economic gain. The capitalist (and now neoliberal) ambitions reflected in the character of Macon prove insufficient.

Macon's warning also proved insufficient to deter young Milkman from going to see his auntie--Pilate. As he and Guitar approached Pilate's house she is described as sitting "wide-legged in a long-sleeved, long-skirted black dress. Her hair was wrapped in black too, and from a distance, all they could really see beneath her face was the bright orange she was peeling" . . .As they came closer and saw the brass box dangling from her ear, Milkman knew that what with the earring, the orange, and the angled black cloth, nothing—not the wisdom of his father nor the caution of the world—could keep him from her" (36).

Milkman felt good in Pilates house. Much like his father did outside lurking. Beyond the typical adolescent allure of transgressing parental boundaries, Milkman felt something more than the fleeting thrill of rebellion. He felt good, whole, comfortable and recognized Pilate's power as an uncalled/supernatural figure. He sat, "comfortably in the notorious winehouse; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of them" (47). This space was surely something to marvel at. For though the house was ragged, the women in it were reviled, and the amenities and resources scarce there was laughter, and there was love. There was also song. Like many other African and African American religious and spiritual practices and traditions of resistance and release, Pilate's living

room offered what today's liberal recognition-based protests cannot; love, joy, and comfortability with one's self and the value of one's own humanity.

As the small space turned into a combination of a wine-house and a church service, it begins to resemble the heterodox Black religiosity I described in the introduction and in chapter one. "Pilate began to hum as she returned to plucking the berries. After a moment, Reba joined her, and they hummed together in perfect harmony until Pilate took the lead" (49). This harmony is important as it signifies the radical Black sociality that is critical to freedom. Not only does it have an immediate impact in the present and for Milkman. But, it harkens back to the past and creates a temporal familial bridge encoded through song:

> O Sugarman don't leave me here
>
> Cotton balls to choke me
>
> O Sugarman don't leave me here
>
> Buckra's arms to yoke me….

At the chorus even Pilate's granddaughter joins in:

> Sugarman done fly away
>
> Sugarman done gone
>
> Sugarman cut across the sky
>
> Sugarman gone home.

The song retells a story of flight, or freedom from bondage, and of abandonment. Sugarman in the first few lines appears to be abandoning the author. The line about,

“cotton balls” signifies the cotton enslaved African Americans were forced to pick. The author pleads not to be left behind. The words “yoke” and “choke” signify extreme forms of bondage and oppression. It is later revealed that the author or at least the speaker in the song was in fact Sing the wife of Sugarman, or Solomon Pilate and Milkman’s not too distant ancestor. And I read that dual escape to freedom while resigning another to the oppressive grasp of bondage along the gendered lines of past and contemporary Black liberation struggles. In other words, during many of the battles for racial freedom and justice in the U.S. Black men marginalized the Black women who fought with them, for them and often more than them. Blinded by patriarchy, sexism, and western gender roles many Black men failed to listen to the voices of their counterparts in the struggle. Freedom then, like for Sugarman, was singularly focused on Black men and like the song eludes to, left Black women's freedom of secondary (if any) importance. Like Sing, Black woman and their intersectionality, historically in many Black liberation movements (though instrumental in their success) are left behind. The second stanza of the song does two other important things however.

The second stanza seems to celebrate the flight as if it were even actually possible, and it celebrates a return to “home”. This normalizing of human flight should not be overlooked as it suggests a different reality, or conception of the possible. Whether the story was true or not, those who tell it and keep it going, view it as a very serious possibility. This is one reason why none of the townspeople in the beginning of the Novel where particularly concerned about the insurance salesman committing suicide. This folk mythology had power in the world and meaning beyond traditional western or scientific

understandings of physics. Representative of a different value system. A system that possesses greater potentialities for freedom than toothless pleas to be recognized by the system that is perpetrating the oppression. The distinction between the magical and the actual is blurred. The figure of the uncalled like the Conjure figure highlighted by Chireau is part of "a magical tradition in which spiritual power is invoked for various purposes, such as healing, protection, and self defense" (Chireau, 12). As Pilate leads this song, she brings to the space and atmosphere all of that; healing, and protection though a song about self-defense. I say self-defense because Sugarman did not seek the recognition of his humanity as a means to end his suffering. No, he took his safety in to his own hands not caring about the perceptions of his oppressor. Instead, he took to the wind and wings of magic to fly away, to fly home.

The effect the song and the communal space of the supernatural moved Milkman. He, "could hardly breathe. Hagar's voice scooped up what little pieces of heart he had left to call his own. When he thought he was going to faint from the weight of what he was feeling, he risked a glance at his friend and saw the setting sun gilding Guitar's eyes, putting into shadow a slow smile of recognition"(49). This kind of non-state-based recognition was mutual.

Aside from Pilate's house and the spaces she inhabits, she herself is repeatedly constructed throughout the novel as other, supernatural, powerful, dangerous, mysterious, and unnatural. She is uncalled, a Conjurer, a healer, and emblematic of a kind of being in the world that I am arguing offers far more freedom then many current models used by a variety of liberation movements bound up in recognition, capitalism, and patriarchy.

Pilate, however, was also a spectacle to her nephew Milkman. As soon as he could, Milkman asks Pilate, "Do you have a navel?" She replied, "No." Prying further Milkman asks, "What happened to it?" Refusing to satisfy his curiosity or acknowledge her difference as deficiency Pilate responds, "Beats me." She dropped a bright peeling into her lap

and separated an orange section slowly. "'Now do I get to ask a question?'" (36). She takes control of the conversation, flips the dynamic and does not dwell on what Milkman finds so interesting and novel. Her lack of a belly button is not a form of entertainment. Though the lack of a mark on her abdomen marks her in society and sets her apart as odd, she still finds, exhibits, and shares wholeness. Pilate's non-normative aesthetic added to her appeal as well as her estrangement. She, "had come struggling out of the womb without help from throbbing muscles or the pressure of swift womb water. . . It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels; had never lain, floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place connected by a tissue-thin tube to a reliable source of human nourishment" (27-8). What does it mean to have not come into the world "through normal channels"? What does it mean that--apparently-- there was no connection of tissue-thin tube in the womb? Why does this provoke such feelings of fear and fascination in others? Perhaps, Pilate's physical appearance destabilizes the on-lookers notions of *the natural.*

Pilate was positioned as different. Therefore, if she came into the world differently, then maybe, she also might have access to different ways of being in the world, free from traditional forms being, or calling. This was only important to others as

it presented opportunities to benefit them. Pilate was perceived not only as a spectacle, but as a commanding presence, and a natural " healer, and among quarreling drunks and fighting women she could hold her own, and sometimes mediated a peace that lasted a good bit longer than it should have because it was administered by someone not like them" (150).

Trudier Harris argues that scholars approaching Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* write this of Pilate's influence as it relates to Milkman's mother, " She has no ultimate redress against her role being usurped by Pilate, the surrogate mother, for Milkman must escape the Dead house, must go into that world, if he is to grow" (12). For Harris, Pilate represented the "secular side of the traditional dichotomy—nonconformity, freedom to explore, ties to history that transcend written records, and the extranatural quality that Ruth's limited imagination can barely glimpse" (12). And that, "[h]er lack of a navel symbolizes her extranatural mothering role, as well as the mythical connotations of an individual who, as Morrison has observed, had to 'literally invent herself'" (12). Harris also makes the connection of Pilate being a natural healer and conjure figure. "Such a distinguishing feature. . .suggest[ed] that she has more than human power. And indeed others view Pilate as having the traits of voodoo doctors and conjurers: "Pilate, who never bothered anybody, was helpful to everybody, but who also was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga—all on account of the fact that she had no navel" (94). Pilate was viewed as special and of having special abilities like the conjure and root works before her, people would turn to her when no other traditional remedy would suffice.

This was the case when it came to Ruth's conception of Milkman. Milkman's mother tells him how Pilate gave Macon Jr. something so she could get pregnant, " I wouldn't have been able to save you except for Pilate. Pilate was the one brought you here in the first place." (124). Pilate's ability to bring life in this situation squarely positions her as a conjure figure. For, as Chireau records,"Conjuring was an all-purpose utility, employed for injuring or destroying enemies, getting rid of rivals or undesirables, softening hearts, winning or holding love. . .breaking up homes. . .producing fertility or baroness in women. . .To believers, these supernatural traditions clearly served multiple purposes, but at the heart of conjuring practices lay a foundational quest for power, explanation, and control" (Chireau, 20). Pilate possessed exactly that power. Ruth recalls for Milkman her sense of Pilate and the instructions she was give, "[s]he came into this city like she owned it. . . "She gave me funny things to do. And some greenish gray grassy-looking stuff to put in his food." Ruth laughed. "I felt like a doctor, like a chemist doing some big important scientific experiment. It worked too. Macon came to me for four days. He even came home from his office in the middle of the day to be with me. He looked puzzled, but he came. Then it was over. And two months later I was pregnant" (125-6). This is a description of what Theophus H. Smith in his book *Conjure Culture* highlights as one of the benefits associated with minor Black religiosities and spiritual practices. Conjure, he argues, is, "the use of natural and artificial materials for medicinal and quasi-medicinal purposes--that is, conjure as a pharmacopeic tradition of practices. This African American meaning, conjure as folk pharmacy, appears prominently in the traditional designation of the expert practice practitioner as a 'conjure doctor.'" (Smith, 5).

Different from European conceptions of conjure that deal exclusively with witchcraft. The effects and uses of conjure in this context, and with Pilate, are generative and bring life. Though Macon--when he realized that happened--didn't want new life or Pilate's influence Ruth found it supportive in bolstering her own resolve. She tells Milkman about how his father responded to her pregnancy, "[w]hen he found out about it, he immediately suspected Pilate and he told me to get rid of the baby. But I wouldn't and Pilate helped me stand him off. I wouldn't have been strong enough without her. She saved my life" (125-6). Pilate was, "the only person she knew of strong enough to counter Macon. . .Even if you weren't frightened of a woman who had no navel, you certainly had to take her very seriously" (138). Pilate is the main reason Milkman was born. And such a feat was accomplished outside normative patterns of religion or science. As an uncalled figure Pilate not only moves around the world different and with power her presence has a positive effect on those around her open to receive it. Whether it is Macon lurking outside of her house window, or Milkman sitting in her living room, or Ruth finally conceiving Pilate's freedom, and access to a modicum of wholeness is transferred. Pilate models a confidence that comes from the inside from an internal well spring of the supernatural, the extra natural. And I would argue this comes specifically due to her position as uncalled. Operating for so long outside of the registers of belonging and mutual recognition. As a woman, and a Black woman, and as a poor Black woman, Pilate existed and had to navigate the margins of intersectional violence and rejection.

Back in her early days as a young girl and later as a young woman. She experienced being rejected by different Black communities because of her difference

(lack of belly button). This rejection through, did not stop her from exercising geographic mobility and sexual agency. Her ability to move around with her geology book in the face of such rejection suggests an alternative to liberation through non-mutual forms of recognition. Before she was rejected however from these various Black communities, she was first accepted. Pilate's journey began with a welcome. Pilate exclaimed, "I could of stayed in that town cause they was plenty of colored people to take me in. In them days, anybody too old to work kept the children. Grown folks worked and left their kids in other people's houses" (142). Though there was a Black communal system of acceptance, work, and child rearing Pilate's acceptance was only welcomed as long as she was recognizable to those whom took her in. The interesting thing about Pilate eventually becoming this powerful uncalled, conjuring, spiritual figure is that it was due to a similar figure a root woman that she is eventually cast out. Pilate is put under investigation, "The root woman was assigned the job of finding out if what he said was true or not. She called Pilate into her shack one day later. "Lay down," she said. "I want to check on something." Pilate lay down on the straw pallet. "Now lift up your dress," the woman said. "More. All the way up. Higher." And then her eyes flew open wide and she put her hand over her mouth. . . "Child, where's your navel?" (143). Despite Pilate's helpful and hard-working disposition while at this community, the moment she is found out to be different--without a navel--she is rejected. Slow to understand even what a navel was--as she never saw anything wrong with herself before it is pointed out by others--Pilate asks the root woman, 'What's it for?'. . .The woman swallowed. "It's for … it's for people whom were born natural." Pilate didn't understand that, but she did understand the

conversation she had later with the root worker and some other women in the camp. She was to leave" (143-4).

The towns people felt a combination of terror and pity for Pilate was viewed as something, "God [had] never made," and so Pilate "went away" (144). If God never made Pilate then He definitely didn't call her she would not have a calling. She is unborn and uncalled. She was rejected by her own community, by her own *people* recognition then, was never an option or path to liberation for Pilate. She simply kept it *moving,* she was "'cut off'. . .early from other people" (142). "Pilate did not want a steady job in a town where a lot of colored people lived. All her encounters with Negroes who had established themselves in businesses or trades in those small midwestern towns had been unpleasant. Their wives did not like the trembling unhampered breasts under her dress, and told her so. And though the men saw many raggedy black children, Pilate was old enough to disgrace them. Besides, she wanted to keep moving" (144). Pilate kept moving because she knew there was something else out there. Something beyond the judgmental, paranoid, and exclusionary social practices of the townsfolk.

Finally, Pilate was "taken on by some pickers heading home, stopping for a week's work here and there, wherever they could find it. Again she took a man to bed, and again she was expelled. . . At sixteen now, she took a lover from one of the island families and managed to keep direct light from ever hitting her stomach. She also managed to get pregnant. . .Pilate refused to marry the man, who was eager to take her for his wife" (144-7). We see here that she is not only rejected for the physical otherness of her stomach, but now her sexual agency and refusal to adhere to the social norms of

marriage. Something is missing and it is not simple recognition. Without family, "she was further isolated from her people. . . on the island, every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion" (147). Pilate's journey for recognition is about to end and wholeness is about to begin.

Pilate finally accepts the rejection she has experienced. Not as acceptable, deserved, or as a just reflection of her worth. No, what she accepted was her own role in learning and seeking out what mattered to her. A process that not only wasn't contingent on recognition but rebuffed it. She embraced her ignorance and, "realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero" (143). Changing what others thought of her was no longer a priority and rejecting normative gendered expression, and performances of femininity she cut her hair. This freed up space for the real liberation work to be done. The narrator recounts, "That was one thing she didn't want to have to think about anymore. Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world? Her mind traveled crooked streets and aimless goat paths, arriving sometimes at profundity, other times at the revelations of a three-year-old" (143-150). Questions of truth, value, and happiness are all critical points of inquiry, however, it is were she chooses to look for those that is central. She fearlessly takes on an inner journey, "Throughout this fresh, if common, pursuit of knowledge. . .she knew there was nothing to fear. That plus her alien's compassion for troubled people ripened her and—the consequence of the

knowledge she had made up or acquired—kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people. Her dress might be outrageous to them, but her respect for other people's privacy—which they were all very intense about—was balancing. She laughed but never smiled" (143-150). Though having been rejected and now self-defining, she does not choose to neglect Black sociality.

Not only does Pilate's rejection of rejection, or divestment from recognition as a path to wholeness, while still seeking out connection on her own terms and for her own means position her as what I am terming an uncalled figure. Pilate's connection to and dialogue with her late father also points to why I am reading her as such an important and powerful supernatural figure. One who offers an example of what is possible when values, definitions, and reality itself is called into question and what was once invisible made visible, and impossible possible. Similar to what took place in chapter one between Old Wife and Minnie Ransom Pilate gets help from her father. She speak to him, though dead. Pilate, like Minnie recognizes no difference between the seen and the unseen. The visible and the invisible worlds are not metaphysically or ontologically distinct; they are, rather, a matter of perception (Clark, 75). Pilate represents the heterodox Black religiosities that show the simultaneous and modified engagements with intended western mainstream articulations of Christianity with something else, something African. Something magical and spiritual. Something Holy, and yet to some blasphemous. For example the state of the dead. Raboteau reports that, "[t]he belief that a person's spirit wanders while the body sleeps was also a part of the lore African black folk" (83). That is to say, the dead are not dead (Clark, 75). They are alive and still offer assistance. Pilate

puts it like this, "'After he buried him, after he was blown off that fence. We both seen him. I see him still. He's helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know.'" she is asked, "'What things?' 'All kinds of things. It's a good feelin to know he's around. I tell you he's a person I can always rely on. I tell you somethin else. He's the only one. I was cut off from people early. You can't know what that was like'" (140). Here, Pilate's relationship and connection to the dead illustratrates how the supernatural can mitigate the negative experiences of rejection.

Like Minnie, Pilate becomes a spiritual practitioner of sorts and a figure of the uncalled who understands not only that the dead are not dead, but commune with the living and that there are invisible worlds at work in the visible realm. This is an understanding that links Pilate to West African spiritual practices, traditions, and perceptions. Eric Jawanza Clark explains, "Indigenous African thought systems [among the Akan and Ga peoples] convey the perspective that the world consists of two essential realities constituting a single unity: the visible and the invisible worlds. These realities are not metaphysically or ontologically distinct but only represent a distinction in perception and the perceivability of the particular observer the spiritual or invisible reality comprises entities that are imperceptible to the naked eye but exist within the same temporal/spatial realm as visible human beings" (75). Ancestors, such as her father, are examples of these invisible, spiritual realities.

This is important to liberation efforts--even personal one's--because, "[w]ith successful entry into the ancestral realm" Clark maintains, "comes increased power and authority over the daily activities of the living community" (75). Pilate testifies to this as

she exclaims, “[h]e’s helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know’”(140). Clark continues, “The ancestors can, and often do, affect reality in our spatial/temporal order in very practical and pragmatic ways. . .They seek communion with the living and the maintenance of the social, corporate structure of a given community." (Clark, 76). The harmony offered by the spiritual realm helps to counter the sorrows of the material world. This connection, or perceivability also provides a stark contrast to Western Christianity’s negative perception of death and the deterioration of the body (77). As an uncalled figure operating in spaces of heterodox Black religiosity Pilate is able to construct a way of being and knowing by calling upon what Michel Foucault terms “'subjugated knowledge,'. . . a type of knowledge that is suppressed, dismissed, and disavowed as legitimate knowledge in a given society. It is this type of knowledge not accepted or allowed to exist as knowledge, a disqualified knowledge" (Clark, 102-3). Pilate “paid close attention to her mentor—the father who appeared before her sometimes and told her things." (Morrison 150). Pilate moves back and forth between spiritual lexicons. After being robbed by Milkman and Guitar of--what they thought was a tarp of gold--her father’s bones Pilate goes down to the police station and performs a lowly widow trying to get her husband’s remains back. She does not press charges and attempts to get them released.

To do so, she deploys a wealth of scripture and Biblical knowledge. She tells the officers “‘Bible say what so e’er the Lord hath brought together, let no man put asunder—Matthew Twenty-one: Two. We was bony fide and legal wed, suh,” she pleaded. Even her eyes, those big

sleepy old eyes, were small as she went on: "So I thought I just as well keep him near me and when I die they can put him in the same hole as me. We'll raise up to Judgment Day together. Hand in hand." Milkman was astonished. He thought Pilate's only acquaintance with the Bible was the getting of names out of it, but she quoted it, apparently, verse and chapter" (206-7). As soon as Pilate, Macon, Milkman, and Guitar are back in the car, Pilate shifts back to the invisible realm and its influences. Pilate explains to her brother--whom had sent the boys to robb her, believing she had gold--that she never had the gold they saw that one day as children in the cave, but that she went back to get the bones cause her dad told her to,

> I went cause Papa told me to. He kept coming to see me, off and on. Tell me things to do. First he just told me to sing, to keep on singing. 'Sing,' he'd whisper. 'Sing, sing.' Then right after Reba was born he came and told me outright: 'You just can't fly on off and leave a body,' he tole me. A human life is precious. You shouldn't fly off and leave it. So I knew right away what he meant cause he was right there when we did it. He meant that if you take a life, then you own it. You responsible for it. . .Papa told me to, and he was right, you know. You can't take a life and walk off and leave it. Life is life. Precious. And the dead you kill is yours. They stay with you anyway, in your mind. So it's a better thing, a more better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go. That way, it frees up your mind." (206-7).

The freedom here is internal and unlike Macon's desire to own things and people, Pilate values others and a responsibility for them is a prerequisite.

Milkman later tells Pilate that the bones she thought were the white man Macon had killed as a boy were actually the bones of her father. The bones had been communing and guiding her. He exclaimed, "That was your father you found. You've been carrying your father's bones—all this time." "Papa?" she whispered. "Yes. And, Pilate, you have to bury him. He wants you to bury him. Back where he belongs. On Solomon's Leap." "Papa?" she asked again. . . "I've been carryin Papa?" . . .The knit cap was pulled down on her forehead and her shoes still had no laces. Every now and then she glanced at the back seat to check on the sack. Peace circled her (329-334). Peace is the fruit of and fulfillment of a freed mind and healthy relationship with self, ancestors, and our community. After Milkman and Pilate walked up the road to the path that led to Solomon's Leap and Guitar ends up shooting Pilate instead of Milkman, with her last breath Pilate laments only one thing, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (334). Love is what was most important. After a life full of rejection and alienation Pilate does not wish to have been seen, known, loved, understood, or accepted more for she has already plugged that hole with wholeness and it is in that space that one truly becomes free.

This chapter attempted to highlight yet another literary example of what I mean by the figure of the uncalled and through a close reading of Pilate's character show the power and benefits of having such qualities. First, that Pilate was not concerned or bound by a longing for non-mutual forms of recognition. An example of what Glen Sean Coulthard in *Red Skin, White Masks*--building off of Fanon's Black Skin, White Masks--"calls a turn inward and away from the master. . .and the power dynamics in which

identities are formed”  Pushing back at Hegel, “Fanon's innovation was that he showed how similar recognitive processes worked to 'call forth' and empower individuals within communities of resistance" (44).  I am arguing that Pilate as an uncalled figure is a model for a resistance outside the rubric of popular freedom struggles entangled in demands for liberal state-based recognition. Not only does Pilate show an example of rejecting rejection, but also a, “form of critical individual and collective self-recognition" (48). This is accomplished through heterodox Black religiosities. What I have defined as the multifarious spiritual traditions and beliefs created, modified, and interpreted by Black folk since slavery to bring meaning, resistance, and healing to Black lives—something between magic and religion, something that troubles the distinction, something that calls attention to the mechanisms of persuasion and the politics of defining one against the other. Such a place was found in Pilate’s living room with Pilate, her daughter and granddaughter, and is highlighted as both Macon and Milkman felt freedom while in proximity.

Pilate’s rejection of capitalist values and calling marks her as an uncalled figure--operating within a radical Black sociality of subversive collectivity, exercising an unusual measure of efficacy over his or her position and standing in life and possesses the ability to heal and liberate while defining and redefining white supremacist conceptions of value over his or her being. A noncanonical African American spiritual practitioner, Pilate, finds a way to peace, freedom, and wholeness. Her life reminds us that “our cultural practices have much to offer regarding the establishment of relationships within and

between peoples and the natural world built on principles of reciprocity and respectful coexistence" (Coulthard 48).

## Chapter 3: One Too Many Light Bulbs: Anti-Visibility in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Having established in the introduction the terminology and theoretical and theological framework for my inquiry of a more liberatory form of protest—one not bound up in patriarchy, capitalism, and a longing for external state-based non-mutual recognition—I moved into my first chapter, where I attempted to illustrate not only the problem, but also a possible solution to Black liberation efforts in the United States. By shifting our collective focus away from such recognition-based tactics shown in Wright's *Native Son* toward an internal journey of healing and wholeness put forth by Bambara in *The Salt Eaters*, I hoped to highlight a model already in practice, albeit one underutilized and theorized. Spaces of heterodox Black religiosity and figures of the uncalled became the ground and vehicles for the kind of change most needed in the Black radical tradition and the conversations surrounding it. First, I had to establish or reestablish the problem with recognition. Not with only my own contribution, but building on of Hegel, Fanon, and Coulthard, I clear the way to think separately from that popular methodology of freedom fighting while noting other impediments to a truer freedom. I also brought to bear several scholars and theologians to flesh out and define heterodox Black religiosities and the uncalled figures with traditions of minor Black Christianities, Conjure Culture, and Black Magic. I continued this development into Chapter Two with a close reading of Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and of the character of Pilate as an uncalled figure similar to Minnie Ransom in *The Salt Eaters*. Both texts served as examples of what is possible

when the focus is turned inward and freedom stems from self-affirming healing and wholeness.

In this chapter, I turn back to the notion of invisibility and recognition as I did in *Native Son*, though this time as it is expressed in Ralph Ellison's well-known novel, *Invisible Man.* My aim is to unpack this idea of visibility and to ascertain how much of the novel actually has to do with pleas for recognition. It is a request, versus the adamant address, "You can't see me! And I don't need you to." Therefore, I read *Invisible Man* in the same vein as *Native Son* as another, much better version of Black authors' cry to white folks for recognition. But I am also troubling that conclusion to see if there is something else happening. Pushing back at my assumptions stems from the self-reflexive critical methodology of rhetorical studies, that is, a particular understanding of language that views, as does Friedrich Nietzsche, all language as uncontrollable and entirely figurative" (Richards 11). And, like Cicero, as a way of thinking that understands all positions are ultimately arguable. Thus, "In this rhetorical tradition, what is valued is the capacity to change one's mind, to go back and unravel positions or viewpoints that seem natural and unremarkable" (Richards 13).

Therefore, my argument against recognition, thought out alongside *Invisible Man*, must be seen more as a temporary offering than as an absolute conclusion. Rhetoric is a critical method (Richards 63). It is the methodology I use to critique liberal forms of recognition-based protest, but it is also the methodology I use to unsettle my own assumptions. Like Derrida, I understand the rhetorical method as a "mode of ideology critique" because "it involves 'an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular

system of thought and behind a whole system of political structures and social institutions maintains its force'" (Richards 159-160). The force I aim to dismantle is the extreme grip white state-based recognition has on the identities, politics, desires, conceptions of freedom, and protest strategies of Black folk in the U.S. in the face of rampant police-perpetrated murder and the plethora of social injustices.

In doing so, however, I will challenge my own assumptions and perceptions of recognition. Kenneth Burke is useful in this as he builds on the prior definitions of rhetoric and claims that "'man' is 'a symbol-using (symbol-making, symbol-misusing) animal'" (Richards 162). If language then is "symbolic action" and, as Burke argues, "shapes our values and beliefs in ways that we are not always aware of" (Richards 162), then a rhetorical analysis is critical to understanding liberation and the methods we take in enacting it. Rhetoric is useful "not only because it makes us 'persuasive' but also because it makes us self-reflexive. In this aspect, it represents the beginning of critical thinking" (Richards 176), similar to what Michel de Montaigne argues as showing us a different way of thinking that challenges an established position (Richards 179). Even as I establish my own, I will consider multiple sides of the issue, both whether *Invisible Man* is indeed advocating for more recognition and whether recognition itself is as big of an obstacle to thinking freedom, as I have argued.

*Invisible Man*, published in 1952, is a critique of the protest movements of its day. Whether the communist or Black nationalist party's agenda, the protagonist, or perhaps Ellison to some degree, points out the problems and limitations with each. It is a narrative that comes full circle and follows the growth and maturation of one young Black male

who journeys from underground in the city, to the country and school, to the city and a search for employment, and back to the underground. Identity and identity formation, however, remain the story's central focuses, especially identity as it relates to being identified or misidentified. The recognition of one's humanity is what marks one's visibility or the lack thereof, one's invisibility, thus the title *Invisible Man*. My focus in this chapter will not be on the overall plot, but on the moments in which the language of visibility, invisibility, and recognition come up in an effort to understand how these terms act on us.

It is not by chance that Ellison focuses on identity. In his essay, "Toward a Critical Genealogy of the U.S. Discourse of Identity: Invisible Man after Fifty Years," Jonathan Arac highlights Ellison's affinity for Burke's work and formulations concerning language and its construction of identity. Arac quotes Ellison recalling that, "What [he] learned from Burke was not so much the technique of fiction but the nature of literature and the way ideas and language operate in literary form"(13). Burke comes to use the word "identification" in place of the term "persuasion." In classical rhetoric it is understood as a means to persuasion: "You persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, idea, and *identifying* your ways with his'" (Richards 165). This understanding of language and identification strongly informs Ellison's thought and work, especially in *Invisible Man*. Burke himself takes the terms "identity" and "identification" very seriously; he wrote ten pages on them in his "Dictionary of Pivotal Terms" in his 1937 *Attitudes toward History* (Arac 15).

To understand recognition alongside identity in *Invisible Man*, it is important to understand the discussion surrounding the issue of identity and how Ellison thought through it. Arac is useful here as he records the problem of how identity was thought of at the time" "Bourgeois naturalism in its most naïve manifestation made a blunt distinction between 'individual' and 'environment,' hence leading automatically to the notion that an individual's 'identity' is something private, peculiar to himself" (16). The problem came when, Arac maintains, "bourgeois psychologists began to discover the falsity of this notion; they still believed in it so thoroughly that they considered all collective aspects of identity under the head of pathology and illusion" (16). A resistance to collective aspects of identity made it hard for Ellison to embrace cultural and political programs of racial separatism and led him to resist what came to be called "identity politics" (Arac 20). Ellison was committed to "the idea of [the] American . . . he summoned the actually existing United States to transform itself in accord with its own stated principles of human equality, principles and statements that had themselves arisen out of revolutionary and civil warfare" (Arac 20). This then would require a certain level of state-based recognition. If the U.S. is to live up to its principles, it must also then be confronted with the harsh realities that exist to the contrary. So then, it seems *Invisible Man* is an attempt to highlight such racial or human inequalities to the end that the United States sees, acknowledges, and addresses the problem. The solution is in recognition.

Arac traces Burke's understanding of identity back beyond Freud to psychoanalysts Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis' definition of "identification." He quotes it in full as the "psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect,

property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified" (Arac 20). Arac argues, "Insofar as Ellison's narrator . . . names his identity as "American" and both "their[s] . . . and mine," he seems to agree with Burke that "identity is not individual" (19). Freudian identification in this definition is not a fixity but a "process: 'transformative, disruptive, and productive. In conclusion, Laplanche and Pontalis emphasize that a "subject's, identifications viewed as a whole are in no way a coherent relational system" (Arac 20). That is, the "whole" is that of an over-determined, symptomatic structure, not an expressive totality (Arac 21). Ellison's aim with this understanding of identity is then to promote the value of self-identity as a citizen, not group identity as a minority.

Building off of Arac's observations and assertions regarding Ellison's relationship with Burke, language, and his understanding of identity or identification, I am reading *Invisible Man* as an attempt to work through issues of recognition and visibility on a rhetorical level. Thus, a rhetorical analysis is required not only to push back at my own assumptions regarding the dangers of recognition-based forms of protest but also to better understand Ellison's argument and position on recognition. Some of Ellison's prologue expresses his intent for this novel and his opinion about protest and observation. Though the author's intent is cursory to a rhetorical analysis as language is promiscuous and unlikely to be controlled to any intended outcome, it is still worth considering as a way in, a reference, or a frame.

Ellison was intent on avoiding writing another racial protest novel such as Wright's *Native Son.* Instead, he wanted to write a "dramatic study in comparative humanity." (xviii). This language of humanity seeks to eclipse race and Blackness as categories worth consideration. For surely a dramatic study of Blackness, or "intense forms of social struggle" (xix), would be too extreme and yet also insufficient to articulate humanity. Seeking to distinguish himself from other writers, Ellison asks "why most protagonists of Afro-American fiction (not to mention the black characters in fiction written by whites) were without intellectual depth" (xix). Ellison sees himself as the one to fill this void in literary fiction. He writes,

> So my task was one of revealing the human universals hidden within the plight of one who was both black and American, and not only as a means of conveying my personal vision of possibility, but as a way of dealing with the sheer rhetorical challenge involved in communicating across our barriers of race and religion, class, color and region—barriers which consist of the many strategies of division that were designed, and still function, to prevent what would otherwise have been a more or less natural recognition of the reality of black and white fraternity. (xxii)

Ellison views his job as one of communication of the human universals found in a Black male American. Rhetoric, the persuasive nature of language, the way by which we identify with one another is the challenge. This suggests two things: that Ellison here indeed is being informed by Burke and is aware of the power of language in being and becoming, in identity, and separation; and that he is absolutely involved in white

recognition. With his goal the “recognition of the reality of black and white fraternity,” Ellison attempts to collapse a racial divide while ignoring the power relationship that created such a divide in the first place. The non-mutual need for recognition leads not to fraternity but to further oppression and codependency. Humanity is mobilized as some noble category superior to the problematic classification of race, as if it were not the humans in the first place who created these terms and constructs to justify ignoble behavior and drives. I find it odd then to keep harkening back to it as a less problematic subject position.

Though much different from *Native Son* in its intent, style, and skill, Ellison’s work is still, like Wright through Max’s speech in court, attempting to share one Black man’s experience in America with white folk so that they better understand what it is like to be Black in America and see the humanity in him, see themselves, and see the universal humanity that is hidden in the noise of race and socially constructed barriers. He states his goal clearly: “to defeat this National tendency to deny the common humanity shared by my character and those who might happen to read of his experience" (xxii). The only difference is that he wants to do it better than previous Black authors.

Not only does his narrator appear at times to be caught up in calls for recognition, but it is almost as if Ellison himself is seeking the intellectual recognition of other white writers who require a more sophisticated, complex, and developed character portrayal. He continues,

> I would have to provide him with something of a worldview, give him a consciousness in which serious philosophical questions could be raised, provide

> him with a range of diction that could play upon the richness of our readily shared vernacular speech and construct a plot that would bring him in contact with a variety of American types as they operated on various levels of society. (xxii)

Is this not just good writing? Perhaps, however, his interest in rhetoric and in crafting this character is centered in his desire to communicate to white folk so that they may identify and in so doing recognized and make visible the humanity of Black people that has gone all too long ignored by white Americans. Thus, his narrator begins with the declaration, "I am an invisible man" (3). This is a state of being that is purely relational. The power to recognize another and be recognized or identified is central in Ellison's approximation of self and how it is not formed in isolation. The narrator explains,

> I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me, they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me. (3)

This investment in recognition concedes that the refusal is one sided. Though not seen, there is still a "me," a self outside of the recognition. The fault and therefore responsibility to act is then on the "peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come in contact" (3) (i.e., external white recognition).

As much as Ellison is attempting not to present a different kind of novel, one that is more than racial protest, the very claims such as, "I am not complaining, nor am I protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to by unseen, although it is most often

rather wearing on the nerves" (3), merely read as the opposite, quite aware of the rhetorical situation and audience's sensibilities. While protesting protest, Ellison protesting for white recognition. In other words, he is saying through the narrator that it is OK to keep reading (white reader); this is not a complaint: "I just want you to understand and see/identify with me." He then goes on to complain about the lack of recognition:

> You're constantly being bumped against by those of poor vision. Or again, you often doubt if you really exist. You wonder whether you aren't simply a phantom in other people's minds. . . And, let me confess, you feel that way most of the time. You ache with the need to convince yourself that you do exist in the real world, that you're a part of all the sound and anguish, and you strike out with your fists, you curse and you swear to make them recognize you. And, alas, it's seldom successful" (4).

What a dangerous place to be mentally. Here, Laplanche's and Pontalis' influences on Ellison are readily seen for "identification," the "psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified" (Arac 20). Absent the recognition offered by the (white) other, the Black self is left incomplete, insecure, and resigned to anguish. But then there is a shift in the narrator's understanding: "it occurred to me that the man had not seen me, actually. . . . I learned in time though that it is possible to carry on a fight against them without their realizing it" (4-5). Now this is curious because again the narrator references a "me" who exists even though not seen.

The narrator next appears to realize the value of his lack of recognition. He recalls, "Several years ago (before I discovered the advantages of being invisible) . . . Now, aware of my invisibility, I live rent-free" (5). What does this mean? Is there is an advantage to being invisible? How are we to read this realization in terms of Ellison's ultimate position on visibility, recognition, and identification? Is it more than the material thrift of not having to pay for rent or electricity the narrator is referring to? Though stated at the beginning of this novel, if both claims are being made at what is essentially the end of the narrator's journey as it comes full circle, then it can be argued that this is the retrospective conclusion as to the matter of being invisible, and thus not a negative one, not spoken by one who laments recognition as a prerequisite or critical component to wholeness. However, perhaps the narrator is unreliable. Perhaps it is something he is trying to convince himself of, or perhaps it is merely an acknowledgement of the "silver lining." Though free, the space the narrator is inhabiting is not commonly associated with the living.

Quick to anticipate the reader's assumptions, he clarifies, "it is incorrect to assume that because I'm invisible and live in a hole, I am dead. I am neither dead nor in a state of suspended animation . . . a state of hibernation" (6). What does it mean that the narrator insists on not being "dead" or in a state of "suspended animation"? His positionality informs his personality. He is underground, which also means he is isolated from others and their ability to reject, ignore, or recognize his humanity. His life absent recognition is likened to death. So it could be that the death he is referring to is social in nature and that he is pushing back at the assumption that he is resigned to being alone and

out of relationships with others. Being "suspended" suggests a tentative aspect to his predicament, a strategic choice. Hibernation implies a rejoining with the world after a time of protective rest. Since this is what the narrator eventually claims he is ready to do after having reconciled his invisibility, it seems as though some level of identification is still required.

While underground and alone, the narrator has to find confirmation elsewhere. With what seems like pride and a jovial tone, the narrator shares with the reader what he has found: "My hole is warm and full of light. Yes, full of light . . . And I love light. Perhaps you'll think it strange that an invisible man should need light, desire light, love light. But maybe it is exactly because I am invisible . . . Light confirms my reality, gives birth to my form" (6). This seems equally as puzzling for as the narrator celebrates the amount of light he has, he also signals to the precarity of his identity or reality. He continues, "Without light I am not only invisible, but formless as well, and to be unaware of one's form is to live a death. I myself, after existing some twenty years, did not become alive until I discovered my invisibility" (7). A shadow is that which appears when an object comes between a light source and any given surface. It is a visible representation of the object. It bears witness of said object and for the narrator "confirms [his] reality." It reminds him of his form when he is otherwise alone. This is why the lights are so important to the narrator: he is still looking to external markers for recognition, freedom, and wholeness. He "loves" the light and fills the "hole" with it because it reveals his form and staves off death. In fact, he maintains that he did not "become" alive until he realized his lack of visibility. The difference between an object

and the form that is represented by its shadow is the level of detail or identifiable data one can gather from it. We can tell that someone is there by their shadow, but not exactly who. Yet, to truly be invisible the mass would not possess the capacity to interrupt light before reaching a surface.

To be invisible then is also to be without form. And if to live without form is death, then invisibility, acknowledged or not, cannot offer life. This is socially speaking, of course. Therefore, social responsibility becomes the real question surrounding issues of visibility. The narrator addresses such a question when he claims that "Irresponsibility is part of my invisibility; any way you face it, it is a denial." He asks, "But to whom can I be responsible, and why should I be when you refuse to see me?" (14) This seems like a call for recognition, or at least some kind of unenforceable social contract. The language of irresponsibility summons the idea of the citizen and its departure from the expectations that have been assigned. Embracing this notion of transgression, the narrator warns, "wait until I reveal how truly irresponsible I am. Responsibility rests upon recognition, and recognition is a form of agreement" (14). The reader asks, reveal to whom and why? The notion of recognition as a form of agreement is interesting in the context of social justice in the United States and when it comes to protest. Does one's humanity require external agreement? Does being recognized as fully human require a two-key verification system akin to that of a bank's safety deposit box? Perhaps that is why Ellison's narrator eventually re-entered the world. But what agreement can be made once he gets there? Must he be more responsible? Has something changed in the world while he was bathing in the lights of secret rebellion? It appears that the world he is about to re-enter is still a

world of exclusion. Remembering the white man he almost killed and his failure to properly recognize him or fear the consequences of not doing so, the narrator makes this excuse for the man: "He, let us say, was lost in a dream world. But didn't he control that dream world—which, alas, is only too real!—and didn't he rule me out of it?" (14) This formulation illustrates the problem with recognition-based protest strategies; it accepts the unequal relationship as natural and strengthens the systems of power and domination that exist.

Yet perhaps it does not. Does the narrator's humanity depend entirely on the recognition of those who are asleep and unwilling to see him? It maybe that *Invisible Man* is a novel that tracks not only the maturation of the narrator, but also his evolving relationship to and valuation of external recognition as confirmation of his humanity. In the first chapter, the reader is made aware of the narrator's concluding revelation:

> I was naive. I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer. It took me a long time and much painful boomeranging of my expectations to achieve a realization everyone else appears to have been born with: That I am nobody but myself. But first I had to discover that I am an invisible man! (15)

This confession and revelation prepare the reader for the journey to come and offer a frame by which to interpret the following events. The struggle for his true identity will first go outward like a boomerang and then back inward to something personally discernible. So then, his concluding thoughts, shared at the beginning, seem to suggest a lack of investment in or desire for external recognition. In other words, the novel is not

about how important recognition is for the construction of identity, but how such a pursuit eventually fails, and one must look inward.

Recognizing and then accepting that one is "invisible"—as in the narrator's case— could be read as a pessimistic surrendering of one's agency in the world and ability to self-fashion, a lonely and frustrating existence. It could also be seen as a rejection of external systems of value and a resolve to continue to move forward despite the lack of visibility. My initial read is that the novel presents on one level a character who looks to others to recognize his humanity, finds that insufficient, goes underground, and then reemerges new and confident in his own identity. Yet on another level it appears that Ellison's use of an inability to allow his protagonist to think outside of the terms of visibility and invisibility show a continued and fixed investment in external white state-based non-mutual recognition. A rhetorical question asks how something works in the world. Where, when, and for whom? A Western philosophical inquiry asks what something "is." Therefore, whether or not the narrator "is" or "is not" visible, I would ask, "Visible to whom?" and, "Visible where?"

Placing the narrator's subjectivity as primarily invisible is problematic as it suggests that white people's vision or refusal to see Black humanity is not only central but universal and that they are the only group looking. As much as it appears Ellison would like to exist and have his characters exist outside of race-based identity politics, the examples he uses to illustrate the narrator's invisibility are from white people. I also find it difficult to accept the idea that Ellison's intended audience was an entirely Black one. Thus, whether or not his protagonist finally learns that he does not need it, Ellison

wants his white readers to understand the feelings and effects of being unseen, shall we say, as Black in America. The move to realizing that the narrator is no one but himself is a rhetorical move that recognizes the sensibilities of his white audience and helps him to prove this not just another protest novel. The novel itself and the conclusion against external recognition are a call for recognition. Because Ellison does not, at least consciously, subscribe to race-based identity politics and prefers his categorizations to be labeled as "human" and "American," he is unable to imagine the freedom possible in spaces of radical Black collectivities: the visibility that is there, the mutual recognition that exists, the healing, and wholeness. His wholeness is in not only a Western conception of self, but also in the overarching and over-determined weight of white visibility as a starting point. The narrator says he had to recognize his invisibility, and I'd ask, by whom? And why? You are not invisible to everyone, so why does one form of non-mutual recognition stand out as the most defining?

The remainder of this chapter's close reading will focus on three moments in particular that highlight the issue of recognition, identity formation, and how they relate to notions of freedom and wholeness. The first is the narrator's encounter with Mr. Norton, their dual encounter with the vet and his rebuke, the subsequent ride back to the school, and the narrator's description of Dr. Bledsoe. The second moment is the narrator's first public speech for the Brotherhood: the lead up, execution, and aftermath. The third and last moment of interest will be in the last chapter of *Invisible Man*, beginning with the fire the narrator starts in the hole and his musings and reflections over his journey and the state of being invisible. Overall, my aim is to think through Ellison's

use of the invisibility and rhetorically go back and forth with my own assumptions as to what he is actually advocating. Paying close attention to the language of recognition this chapter serves as a space to, as Burke puts it, "understand how we act on ourselves and others in both an inadvertent as well as an overt manner" (Wess 204) and to use argument to "effect a series of dizzying reversals which aim to develop a way of interacting and cooperating that is strong enough to keep 'states of domination' at bay" (Richards 20). This is why I take a much more tentative approach in this chapter than I do in the others.

**The College**

After the narrator takes Mr. Norton to the cabin of Jim Trueblood, "a sharecropper who had brought disgrace upon the black community" (46), the two end up at the Golden Day for a drink. Mr. Norton is out of sorts, and this is the nearest location for a respite. Unfortunately for the narrator, they also run into a bold vet who not only recognizes the narrator's humanity but also his investment in the white man's, Mr. Norton's, recognition. With the confidence that comes from not needing white recognition, the vet waxes eloquently on the relationship he sees before him.

The narrator seems conflicted as he listens and processes his feelings: "the vet was acting towards the white man with a freedom which could only bring on trouble." He thinks, "I wanted to tell Mr. Norton that the man was crazy and yet I received a fearful satisfaction from hearing him talk as he had to a white man" (92-3). Such a scene illustrates the bind of white recognition and how it is so anxiety inducing. It shows how his positionality in the eyes of white people is so tentative that even the actions and words of another Black person threatens to diminish his standing, worth, and even humanity.

This in turn creates a divide between Black folk as desires for white recognition lead to desires for distinction and individuality.

Yet it seems by writing this scene that Ellison is attempting to highlight such a problem with recognition. Speaking to Mr. Norton and the narrator with a smile, the vet exclaims, "You cannot see or hear or smell the truth of what you see and you, looking for destiny! It's classic! And the boy, this automaton, he was made of the very mud of the region, and he sees far less than you." (95). Rebuking Mr. Norton for his blindness, the vet also reveals the impact of such an unequal relationship. He continues, "Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other." Here, he indicts the narrator for also being blind, but the problem is that Mr. Norton does not require the narrator's recognition, neither does it shape his identity in the same way. Instead of being the validation of his humanity, the vet argues that the narrator is simply "a mark on the score-card of [Mr. Norton's] achievement, a thing and not a man; a child, or even less, a black amorphous thing'" (95). Mr. Norton too is no man but a "God, a force '" (95). Surely this imbalance in perception is not being embraced by Ellison, but it does seem that the assumed investment in recognition is equal and equally needed. They are equally wrong about each other, and the problem isn't with desires for white recognition itself, but with misrecognition. Such an investment still assumes Mr. Norton's ability to deny the narrator's humanity and, more than that, to shape his destiny. Not letting the two leave just yet, the vet finishes his fearless assessment. Referring to the narrator, he tells Mr. Norton, "He believes in you as he believes in the beat of his heart. He believes in that great false wisdom taught slaves and pragmatists alike, that white is right" (95).

Grounding the roots of this desire in slavery, the vet looks forward to the future and insists, “I can tell you his destiny. He'll do your bidding, and for that his blindness is his chief asset” (95). The responsibility to “see” is the narrator’s. He must see the folly in worshiping white men.

But why does the vet need to tell Mr. Norton such things? Might this be a message to the white readers as to why recognition must be equal, that the responsibility to recognize the humanity of the other is shared, that white is not right, and that white folks need to know that? They need to be told of their error in how they threaten, view, and hold expectations regarding Black folk. This moment then seems, although the vet speaks fearlessly, about the mistreatment of Blacks at the hands of whites and their negative psychological impact. It is still about getting white recognition and the tentative nature of the narrator’s identity. The vet speaks with freedom, but after threatening to assault the two, he still lacks the presence to he heard or seen. Mr. Norton simply reads the vet as “crazy” and in excess of reality and not worthy of consideration. So, whose benefit do the vet’s words serve? Is it to enlighten the white reader, or is it to help the narrator to see his own blindness? Either way, it does not seem to be a rebuke or recognition but a call for the recognition of the misrecognition Mr. Norton and the narrator share. This also may simply serve as a marker for when the narrator is confronted with his strong desire for white recognition.

**The Trip Back To Campus**

As the narrator and Mr. Norton begin to drive back to the college, the narrator is tortured by thoughts of what it might mean for his identity and scholastic career to have fallen out of favor with Mr. Norton. He asks himself, "What would happen now? What would the school officials say? In my mind I visualized Dr. Bledsoe's face when he saw Mr. Norton . . . .What would the white folks think who'd sent me to college?" (98) The amount of space white recognition takes up in the minds of Black folk is unsustainable. It weighs too heavy and lopsided. Again, according to Hegel's master/slave dialectic, "liberal politics of recognition assumes that our identities are formed *inter subjectively* through our complex social interactions with other subjects" (Coulthard, 17). The problem is that identities are not formed equally or completely and can be deformed if one side thinks that they need recognition from the other yet has no way of defining the terms. Considered through the lens of Fanon's critique of Hegel's master/slave dialectic, Coulthard concludes that rather than being a source of freedom, recognition is, in fact, the power field used by colonial relations to produce and maintain power (16). The narrator's identity is being shaped by Mr. Norton's opinion, but this is one sided and merely strengthens white domination. Instead of processing the vet's observations, he laments the whole encounter: "Was Mr. Norton angry at me? In the Golden Day he had seemed more curious than anything else until the vet had started talking wild . . . why would the vets act that way with a white man in the house?" (98). As I discussed in Chapter One, Coulthard summarizes Fanon's critique of recognition as "delegated exchanges of recognition" and domination that occur in the real world where the boundaries of

accommodation are limited in scope to those who best serve the interests of the dominant influence" (17). This critique points to a structural problem with colonial recognition that locks the "subaltern populations" into "psycho-affective" attachments to these structures that over time serve to maintain these structures (Coulthard, 18). The narrator here is certainly locked into a "psycho-affective" attachment. He states, "My predicament struck me like a stab. I had a sense of losing control of the car and slammed on the brakes in the middle of the road, then apologized and drove on" (99). The feeling of possibly displeasing Mr. Norton overcomes him. And the narrator is forced to consider both his fate and identity. He states, "Here within this quiet greenness I possessed the only identity I had ever known, and I was losing it. In this brief moment of passage I became aware of the connection between these lawns and buildings and my hopes and dreams" (99). It is clear that not only is the narrator (in this moment) so invested in the non-mutual recognition of whiteness that he is willing to accommodate any whim of Mr. Norton's, yet by doing so he knowingly seeks to keep structures of domination in place. He considers:

> I wanted to stop the car and talk with Mr. Norton, to beg his pardon for what he had seen; to plead and show him tears, unashamed tears like those of a child before his parent; to denounce all we'd seen and heard; to assure him that far from being like any of the people we had seen, I hated them. (99)

In a further attempt to distance himself from those at the Golden Day, he rehearses what he wants to tell Mr. Norton, namely that he "believed in the principles of the Founder with all [his] heart and soul, and that [he] believed in [Mr. Norton's] own goodness and

kindness in extending the hand of his benevolence to helping us poor, ignorant people out of the mire and darkness" (99). The narrator assures himself that he would do

> [Mr. Norton's] bidding and teach others to rise up as he wished them to, teach them to be thrifty, decent, upright citizens, contributing to the welfare of all, shunning all but the straight and narrow path that he and the Founder had stretched before us. If only he were not angry with me! If only he would give me another chance! (99)

Still hopeful, the narrator drives on in silence back to the college to the tune of a deafening anxiety.

The narrator's mind then shifts to concerns of what Dr. Bledsoe will think and how he will react to him having taken such an important white man to see Trueblood and the Golden Day. What I find of particular interest is the way the narrator describes Dr. Bledsoe:

> He was the example of everything I hoped to be: Influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but two Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife. What was more, while black and bald and everything white folks poked fun at, he had achieved power and authority; had, while black and wrinkle-headed, made himself of more importance in the world than most Southern white men. They could laugh at him, but they couldn't ignore him. (100-1)

Like Milkman's father Macon Jr. in *Song of Solomon*, Dr. Bledsoe views wealth and capitalistic gain as the path to being recognized as fully human by white men. The ideas that due to his finances white men could not ignore him, or would be forced to recognize him, and that he was able to achieve power this way suggest that regardless of position—doctor, or student—a Black man's sole purpose and aim in becoming successful is to get the attention, respect, and recognition of white men. Such a preoccupation could never result in freedom. Because this time in the narrator's life has already been framed as prior to his enlightenment and Dr. Bledsoe is revealed in the end to have not been the example to follow, what purpose does this preoccupation serve?

Is Dr. Bledsoe, in fact, as invested in recognition by white folks as the narrator imagines? Perhaps the accommodationist practices are merely a performance. Dr. Bledsoe pushes back at the narrator's excuse for bringing Mr. Norton: "'Damn what he wants,' [Dr. Bledsoe] said, climbing in the front seat beside me. 'Haven't you the sense God gave a dog? We take these white folks where we want them to go; we show them what we want them to see. Don't you know that? I thought you had some sense'" (102). Here, the power to control what white people see is flipped, and recognition becomes less about what white folks refuse to see (Black people's humanity) and more about what Black folks refuse to show. This notion of refusal as it relates to visibility is critical. With whom does the responsibility of visibility lie? Is it as Dr. Bledsoe puts it, and Black folk control what we want white people to see? Is this actually a sign of power, or is it still just a preoccupation with whiteness and their approval and recognition that causes those like Bledsoe to regulate their behavior, language, and humanity to be seen as human?

At first glance, it seems like Dr. Bledsoe is aware of some kind of power that confuses and distresses the narrator in the crafted duplicity with which he manages white folks and their perceptions. We should ask, why and to what end is it necessary to control what white folks see when looking at Black bodies? I would argue here, and in most cases, the answer it so that they recognize us. The narrator tries to process what he just hears from Dr. Bledsoe and thinks, "It just wasn't true. I had misunderstood. He couldn't have said what I thought he had said. Hadn't I seen him approach white visitors too often with his hat in hand, bowing humbly and respectfully?" (105-6) If that is the reality the doctor wants white folks to see and believe, it does not seem likely that the subversive act is to subvert their influence, but to prove the reality that he is human and worthy of respect.

The problem is that the Dr. Bledsoe, and the narrator even more so, lets the opinions of white folk weigh too heavily on them. The statement, "You can't see me," can be read as an appeal as in the narrator's case, as a deliberate deception as in Bledsoe's case, or as my title for this dissertation suggests as an emphatic and colloquial Black phrase that rejects the very need for recognition along with the inevitable failure if even attempted. And then there is the vet's approach according to the narrator: "He was so crazy that he corrupted sane men. He had tried to turn the world inside out, goddamn him! He had made Mr. Norton angry. He had no right to talk to a white man as he had, not with me to take the punishment" (106). The ability to speak truth to power and create new worlds is a power that exists outside of recognition. The vet's claim is that "I see

you!" What is not clear yet is which sentiment the narrator conveys in this novel about invisibility.

A following event addressing identity is the narrator's first speech to the mixed-race crowd of the Brotherhood. How does this moment relate to recognition and to the narrator's own identity formation? In the lead-up to the speech, the narrator thinks his new suit imparts a newness to him as well, saying, "It was the clothes and the new name and the circumstances. It was a newness too subtle to put into thought, but there it was. I was becoming someone else . . . I liked, but didn't trust old Master; I wanted to please, but did not trust the crowd" (335). The narrator feels new, but why does he not trust the audience yet wants to please them? Again, given the ending, this seems to be another example of how not to go about building identity.

He takes the stage after a "song was ending and the building rang with applause, yells, until the chant burst from the rear and spread: No more dispossessing of the dispossessed! No more dispossessing of the dispossessed! The audience seemed to have become one, its breathing and articulation synchronized" (340). The notion of dispossession seems to be the unifying marker for the Brotherhood. And if the audience identifies with this designation, then the narrator's goal is to appeal to their sense of loss and connection. This is a moment where recognition is experienced, yet not as top-down white or state-based non-mutual recognition. Though it is a mixed crowd and organization with white people on the stage and in the audience, it is presented as a moment of recognition.

The narrator describes the scene: “It was as though a semi-transparent curtain had dropped between us, but through which they could see me—for they were applauding—without themselves being seen. I felt the hard, mechanical isolation of the hospital machine, and I didn't like it” (341). After a rough start the narrator picks up on the language of dispossession and begins to win the crowd over. He hears:

> “We with you, Brother. You pitch 'em we catch 'em!” That was all I needed, I'd made a contact, and it was as though his voice was that of them all.” (342). The narrator feels the validation he needs, stays in that lane, and continues, "Yes, we're the uncommon people, and I'll tell you why. They call us dumb, and they treat us dumb. . . . And do you know what makes us so uncommon? . . . We let them do it.” The silence was profound. “Another strike,’ I heard the voice call sadly. “Ain't no use to protest the decision!” And I thought, “Is he with me or against me?”

The narrator attempts to gain the acceptance of his audience. This can be read as what classic rhetorician Quintilian would call “bad oratory, which seeks to please rather than to win, [and it] is deemed effeminate” (Richards 71). Good oratory is classically considered manly and “entails wielding arguments as weapons in a quest for domination in the public arena” (Richards 71). Rhetoric has everything to do with how Ellison understands identity formation, with my methodology in analyzing this novel, and also with the narrator’s speech. He continues:

> Dispossession! Dis-possession is the word! . . . They've tried to dispossess us of our manhood and womanhood! Of our childhood and adolescence . . . Don't you

> know you're lucky to be uncommonly born? Why, they even tried to dispossess us of our dislike of being dispossessed! And I'll tell you something else; if we don't resist, pretty soon they'll succeed! These are the days of dispossession, the season of homelessness, the time of evictions. We'll be dispossessed of the very brains in our heads! And we're so uncommon that we can't even see it! (343)

The narrator aligns himself with the audience as one of the dispossessed, one of the uncommon. He appeals to their emotions (for which he is later rebuked) and calls for resistance. To be lucky and blind suggests a hidden value in being uncommon. It sounds similar to my argument about the benefits of being uncalled; however, the term "dispossessed" attempts to conceal the racial differences in the crowd and flatten the oppression or dispossession to a universal unvaried experience. This would be in line with Ellison's aversion to identity politics.

I find it odd because dispossession does not seem like any better a reason than race to rally around. Nevertheless, the rhetorical aim of his speech is doomed to failure once viewed alongside a more nuanced understanding of how language actually works. Edward P.J. Corbett recognizes rhetoric "as 'an inescapable activity in our lives.' 'Every day', he notes, 'we either use rhetoric or are exposed to it. Everyone living in community with other people is inevitably a rhetorician" (Richards 114-115). Therefore, the power the narrator believes he has is neither unique nor complete. As rhetoric underwent a redefinition, "Rhetoric was no longer regarded as a resource, which could be called upon by the skilled speaker or writer to affect others. On the contrary, it was understood that language is so profoundly and pervasively figurative that the tropes and figures cannot be

rationalized and controlled at all; that is, rhetoric could not be reduced to an 'art'" (Richards 116). The narrator, however, believes that he is such a skilled speaker. He thinks, "They were mine, out there, and I couldn't afford to lose them. Yet I suddenly felt naked, sensing that the words were returning . . . I shouted. 'You are my friends. We share a common disinheritance, and it's said that confession is good for the soul. Have I your permission?' 'You batting .500, Brother,' the voice called" (345).

This affirmation has a transformative effect on the narrator, "'Something strange and miraculous and transforming is taking place in me right now . . . as I stand here before you!' I could feel the words forming themselves, slowly falling into place" (345). The recognition of the audience serves as yet another external marker of his humanity. The narrator is still looking outward. He confesses, "I feel, I feel suddenly that I have become more human. Do you understand? More human. Not that I have become a man, for I was born a man. But that I am more human. I feel strong" (346). He feels as though he has come home and that the audience represents his brothers and sisters. He ends the speech with a bold pronouncement, "My true people! My true country! I am a new citizen of the country of your vision . . . WE ARE THE TRUE PATRIOTS! THE CITIZENS OF TOMORROW'S WORLD! WE'LL BE DISPOSSESSED NO MORE!" (346). The narrator's claim can be read as purely an act of attempted manipulation and identification with the audience; however, since the narrator has yet to reach his full or final point of maturity, I read it as yet another moment highlighting the human ability to be shaped by the perceptions of others and also the folly in doing so.

The final moments to be considered in this chapter occur in the last chapter of *Invisible Man* and the epilogue. In the hole burning the contents of his briefcase, the narrator comes to a conclusion about all those with whom he has come in contact and who had kept him "prisoner" (569). He refers to

> a group consisting of Jack and old Emerson and Bledsoe and Norton and Ras and the school superintendent and a number of others whom [he] failed to recognize, but all of whom had run [him] . . . [he] was protesting their holding [him] and they were demanding that [he] return to them and were annoyed with [his] refusal. (569)

Seeing clearly now as if for the first time, he exclaims, "I'm through with all your illusions and lies, I'm through running" (569). Taking responsibility and ownership of his freedom he says, "I'll free myself" (569). In a dream Jack asks the narrator, "'HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE FREE OF ILLUSION?' he answered, 'Painful and empty' (569). Awake and empty the narrator felt a sense of wholeness" (571). This complicates my initial assumption that the narrator advocates a freedom and wholeness that are bound to the desire for external white recognition. Instead, we are left with a protagonist who has come to a place of solitude and contemplation, a place where he is able to look inward and accepts the value of his own opinion. He realizes that his problem was that he "always tried to go in everyone's way but [his] own" (573). He says, "I have also been called one thing and then another while no one really wished to hear what I called myself. So after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others, I finally rebelled. I am an invisible man" (573). The affirmation of his invisibility seems less about a desire for

visibility by white folks and more about what becomes possible when that is no longer a concern. The narrator reflects, “Now, after first being ‘for’ society and then ‘against’ it, I assign myself no rank or any limit, and such an attitude is very much against the trend of the times. But my world has become one of infinite possibilities” (576). He indeed is free, free to, “[s]tep outside the narrow borders of what men call reality and . . . into chaos . . . or imagination” (576). Refusing to conform any longer to the patterns placed upon him, he better understands his relationship to himself and to invisibility.

One’s humanity, then, is not something to be fought for or granted by others, but something to be accepted. This is expressed as the narrator ponders his grandfather’s experience:

> Once I thought my grandfather incapable of thoughts about humanity, but I was wrong. Why should an old slave use such a phrase as, “This and this or this has made me more human,” as I did in my arena speech? Hell, he never had any doubts about his humanity—that was left to his “free” offspring. He accepted his humanity just as he accepted the principle. It was his, and the principle lives on in all its human and absurd diversity. (580)

Acceptance of one’s humanity as opposed to seeking outward recognition now seems to be at the heart of this novel, and I would argue Ellison’s position on visibility. However, this reading is thrown off when the narrator ends with the reason for his return, “Even hibernations can be overdone, come to think of it. Perhaps that's my greatest social crime, I've overstayed my hibernation, since there's a possibility that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play” (581). This last part seems as if the narrator is still

invested in the state-based recognition of becoming a good American citizen. The language of responsibility seems to stifle his previous statement about possibility. My conclusion on the matter may appear unclear or unsettled, but that is my intent.

As I stated in the beginning, my approach is rhetorical. And just as Burke understood it, I understand that, "We are constituted in language, but we are not determined by it. Language is flexible, re-definable, re-usable . . . he recognizes the inevitability of the impulse to order and to hierarchize. We must seek always to unsettle this impulse rather than to overcome it otherwise it is reconstituted without our realizing it" (Richards 163). I wish to remain unsettled because, as Nietzsche argues, "our lives are organized around a tissue of lies and that humanity is intrinsically self-deceiving, so much so that we can never gain a clear understanding of the 'truth' of things " (Richards 133). Therefore, I leave this chapter with the feeling of being unfinished and unsettled. My hope is that this chapter adds to and not detracts from my central theme of uncalling. Because my focus has always been two fold. The reiteration of protest novels being bound by nonmutual state recognition allows me to ground the next chapter in the alternative, those figures of the uncalled and Black religiosities. Explorations of this kind of unsettled protest are necessary measures for highlighting the certainty of the uncalled as transformative and alternative.

## Chapter 4: I Love You Cuz You're Mine, I See You Cuz You're There: The Unborn and the Uncalled in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust*

This chapter concludes my set of close readings and examples of uncalled figures and the spaces of heterodox Black religiosities they inhabit. It continues to focus on the inherent benefits of an indigenous African and African-descended (reinterpreted/negotiated) spirituality that nurtures self-definition, cultural practices, and radical networks of Black collectivity and seeks to raise awareness of the danger, frustration, and limitations of trying to meet the demands of whiteness and living through the paradigm of white eyes. I saw the film and read the novelization of Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* and see the matriarch Nana Peazant, the Unborn Child, and the influence of ancestors on the Sea Islands, Gullah Islands, and Ibo Landing as part and parcel of what I have termed heterodox Black religiosities and the figure of the uncalled. Nana and the Unborn Child operate much like Minnie Ransom and Old Wife in *The Salt Eaters*: as the pairing of a spiritual practitioner aided and accompanied by the dead, or not-yet alive, or something that refuses the distinction. This final chapter seeks to bring full circle the figure of the uncalled by giving one last example of such a figure and by doing so as an alternative means to gaining freedom and wholeness. Like Minnie Ransom in Chapter One, and Pilate Dead in Chapter Two, Nana Peazant highlights the power and possibility of self-empowerment and divergent spiritual belief systems that fall outside of dominant Western Christianity's mandates. As a counterpoint, it will trouble the common assumption that posits recognition as a necessary component of Black protest.

The film *Daughters of the Dust*, the book *The Making of an African American Woman's Film:* Daughters of the Dust, the novel *Daughters of the Dust* and Black Feminist theorists such as Bell Hooks, LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, Mae Gwendolyn Henderson, and Audre Lorde serve not only as an examples of heterodox Black religiosities and uncalled/conjure figures, but also as examples of why Black women's thoughts, perspectives, and writings are critical to thinking toward a more liberatory practice of mental, spiritual, and physical emancipation beyond the trappings of Black male patriarchy and the limitations of white recognition.

I was ten years old when the film *Daughters of the Dust* was first released in 1991, and even then Nana Peazant stood out to me. Her love for her offspring and her longing to impart to them a sense of worth and pride in their ancestry, a connection to their ancestors and cultural traditions, as well as the spiritual practices of old stuck with me after all these years. As I came to the idea of what I would later refer to as the figure of the uncalled, Peazant quickly came to mind. And as I read the script and follow-up novel, my suspicions proved correct.

*Daughters of the Dust* is set in 1902 on the Gullah/Geechee Island off the coast of South Carolina and is a multigenerational story that records the Peazant family's preparation and lead-up to many of their migrations over to the mainland. With its nonlinear chronology, non-Hollywood-style pacing, and striking visual presentation, the film immediately subverts normative expectations while placing Black women at the forefront in rich and layered ways. The Peazant family live on Ibo Landing, and due to their geographic location and separation from colonizers intent on assimilation, much of

their West African cultures (Ibo, Yoruba, Kikongo, Mende, and Twi), languages, and spiritual beliefs have been insulated and allowed to evolve, grow, and thrive unmolested over time.

The film is narrated by the Unborn Child, or future daughter of Eli and Eula. For many of the characters, such as Viola and Haagar, the mainland represents modernity, opportunity, and upward mobility. For others, such as Nana, the island represents something of continued value and spiritual importance, a critical component to community and identity formation. There are contrasting views on internalized Western forms of Christianity and the religious expressions and practices espoused by Nana, family drama, sexual violence, marital conflict, queer relationships, interracial love affairs, and children frolicking on the beach. A quick Google search yields a more in-depth summary, and Netflix is currently hosting the film for easy consumption. My focus here is fourfold. First, I examine Dash and Bell Hooks' exchange about the film's creation and the issues at work. Second, I will provide a close reading of the script to isolate and analyze the moments in which Nana speaks and the encounters she has with the other characters to highlight how she is and operates in the power of an uncalled/Conjure figure and how her actions and spiritual practices illustrate the heterodox Black religiosities I introduced in Chapter One. Third, I will interrogate similar moments and recollections of Nana and the stories told by her friend Miz Emma Julia in the novel. Fourth, I will attempt to position the two works themselves to form a framework and methodology in thinking about Black freedom.

Black women's writings, such as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman Literary Tradition," offer a specific and relevant perspective on consciousness and the notion of recognition and subjectivity that my project is interested in. She posits:

> The interlocutory character of black women's writings is . . . not only a consequence of dialogic relationship with an imaginary or "generalized Other," but a dialogue with the aspects of "otherness" within the self. The complex situatedness of the black woman as not only the "Other" of the Same, but also as the "other" of the other(s) implies . . . a relationship of difference and identification with the "other(s)." (17-18)

The implications of such an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self complicate and enhance theories of, and my own handling of, recognition-based forms of Black protest.

For example, according to Henderson, it is Mikhail Bakhtin's "notion of dialogism and consciousness" (18), that serves as the model for her approach. She maintains that, "According to Bakhtin, each social group speaks in its own 'social dialect'—possesses its own unique language—expressing shared values, perspectives, ideology, and norms" (18). This is important because, if Bakhtin is correct and language is "an expression of social identity, then subjectivity (subjecthood) is constituted as a social entity though the "roll of [the] word as medium of consciousness" (18). Consciousness, then, like language, is shaped by the social environment. Thus, "Consciousness becomes consciousness only . . . in the process of social interaction"

(18). In other words, the rhetorical force of language in identity formation is significant and social. The danger in recognition-based forms of protest is that they seek out approval and are shaped by (while also strengthening) dominant white non-mutual structures of power and oppression. What my mother would call "letting someone live rent free in your brain" is what Henderson and Bakhtin would consider the force social interactions have on consciousness. In attempting to think away from such malformations of one's subjectivity, Black women's writings and consciousness make available an alternative, non-masculine way of conceptualizing recognition and the "other" by way of something Bakhtin refers to as "inner speech." (18). Henderson, building off of Bakhtin's definition and analysis of the relationship between consciousness and inner speech, argues that, "the units of which inner speech is constituted are certain whole entities . . . *[resembling] the alternating lines of dialogue* . . . Thus consciousness becomes a kind of 'inner speech' reflecting 'the outer world' in a process that links the psyche, language, and social interaction" (18). This link between the psyche and social interaction is what Black women's writings are particularly suited to navigate. Refusing to view self as singular, new possibilities arise:

> It is the process by which these heteroglossic voices of the other(s) "encounter one another and coexist in the consciousness of real people—first and foremost in the creative consciousness of people who write novels," that speaks to the situation of black women writers in particular, "privileged" by a social positionality that enables them to speak in dialogically racial and gendered voices to the other(s) both within and without. If the psyche functions as an

> internalization of heterogeneous social voices, black women's speech/writing becomes at once a dialogue between self and society and between self and psyche. Writing as inner speech, than, becomes what Bakhtin would describe as "a unique form of collaboration with oneself" in the works of these writers. (18-19)

This observation is critical in understanding what is at work in Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (film and novel) as well as how external recognition is not as over-determined as one might think in the formation of identity. What distinguishes Black women's writing for Henderson, is "the privileging (rather than repressing) of 'the other in ourselves.' . . . 'creative dialogue' then refers to the expression of a multiple *dialogic of differences* based on this complex subjectivity. At the same time black women enter into a *dialectic of identity* with those aspects of self shared with others" (19). This heteroglossia, or "privileged communication . . . outside the realm of public discourse; this ability to utter the mysteries of the spirit," (22) is what Black women's speech/writing makes possible. It is an underexplored resource for any meaningful attempts at Black liberation outside and contrasts with popular liberal articulations of recognition-based protest. Thus, "Through their intimacy with the discourse of the other(s), black women writers weave into their work competing and complementary discourses, discourses that seek both to adjudicate competing claims and witness common concerns" (23).

Bearing witness, however, is not without risk. For as Lorde admits in her entry for *Sister Outsider,* "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," she is afraid because the "transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (42). She maintains that "you're

never really a whole person if you remain silent. In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear—fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation" (42). The fear of recognition due to the danger of almost certain distortion complicates the issue of visibility because "Black women have on one hand always been highly visible, and so, on the other hand, have been rendered invisible through the depersonalization of racism . . . But most of all, [she] think[s] [that], we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live" (42). This is a curious formulation as it seems to both require and yet revile recognition as a means to life and wholeness. Regardless, Black women's writing and speech provide important pathways by which Black resistance can be thought and the psyche formed. Lorde says, "For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of that language by which we speak it" (43).

The film *Daughters of the Dust* is such a text and example of the power and necessity of Black women's voices and writing. The written text, *The Making of An African American Woman's Film:* Daughters of the Dust, highlights Nana's importance to her family in the preface and establishes her as an important conjure figure, or what I have termed an uncalled figure, one who as a non-canonical African American spiritual practitioner is in tune with the invisible realm and supernatural forces made available by heterodox Black religiosities. Operating within a radical Black sociality of subversive collectivity, this figure exercises an unusual measure of efficacy over their position and standing in life and possesses the ability to heal and liberate while defining and redefining white supremacist conceptions of value over their being.

Nana implores her progeny to “Call on the ancestors,” and as she keeps old memories alive with stories of the Ibos and their arrival, conventional notions of reality disappear and new values and possibilities are foregrounded. Dash writes, “They say that when the boat brought the Africans in from a big slaving ships, and Ibos stepped onto the shore in their chains, took a look around, and seeing what the Europeans further had in store for them, turned right around and walked all the way home to the Motherland" (xi). Nana encourages their imagination to soar and teaches them that they too could “indeed walk on the water, so long as [they knew] where [they were] going and why" (xi).

At the Peazant’s family reunion picnic Nana performs a ritual of “protections against the hazards of ‘crossing over.’ She creates an amulet from scraps of the ancestral past: her most potent gris-gris is a clump of her mother's hair, a last minute keepsake the mother yanked from her scalp before she was snatched from Nana, the child, the sold down river” (xiii). These rituals clearly mark her as an uncalled figure not only in the sense that she possesses a certain kind of power, but also that this spiritual practice falls outside the normative and hegemonic traditions of the Christianity introduced by white people (and endorsed by many Black people since slavery) that served the white supremacist aims of dehumanization and assimilation. Uncalling is a rejection of both white recognition and notions of calling and of many (not all) mainstream Black understandings of calling that suffer the same entanglement with the logics of white supremacy. This is rejected by those such as Haagar, who regards it as the “’hoodoo mess’ she wishes to rescue her family from by migrating north” (Dash xiii). However, Eula, mother of the Unborn Child, “who co-narrates the film's story with Nana,” (Dash

xiii), pulls “strength” from the story. And it is “through Eula, the relatives are drawn into a healing Circle and mend their rifts" (Dash xiii). Nana makes clear her intentions: “'I'm trying to give you something to track your spirit with'” (Dash xiii).

After Dash’s initial entry about Nana’s significance, but before the script is introduced, the reader is privy to a back-and-forth exchange between her and renowned author, Black feminist, and activist, Bell Hooks. Given the relative isolation of the Sea Island Gullahs from the mainland of South Carolina and Georgia, the Gullah fostered a distinct, imaginative, and original African American culture (27). Understanding that, Hooks notices that Dash appears in *Daughters*(film) to be “constructing for us an imaginative universe around the question of Blackness and black identity.” (30). Dash responds by acknowledging that “myth . . . plays a very important part in all of our lives” and argues that the myth of the Ibo Landing helped to sustain the slaves and the people who were living in that region” (30) and that myth is very important in the struggle to maintain a sense of self and move forward into the future. This kind of world building is precisely why Nana, as an uncalled figure, and Dash’s work here itself is so critical to the Black radical struggle.

The dialogue continues around the use and appropriation of particular religious practices and traditions on the island. The dual tension, or simultaneous engagement with both hegemonic forms of Christianity and magic, or Conjure, is a tension Dash illustrates through the characters of Haagar and Viola. As I discussed in Chapter One, Conjure and Christianity in spaces of heterodox Black religiosity were not mutually exclusive and often complemented each other by servicing different needs. Nevertheless, there was also

conflict and at times a need for subterfuge. Due to white supremacist logic's lodging itself in the hearts and minds of many Black folks, this connection was not always evident, or even embraced. So, as Dash says to Hooks, "A lot of African American people will hide within this Baptist religion, but they're really practicing the same thing. They're just hiding their gods, hiding their rituals within Christianity, which for them was Modern." Referring to Viola, Hooks responds:

> I think she definitely stands—as does Hagar—for a force of denial, denial of the primal memory. I keep thinking about violation when I think about Viola because it seems to me that if she had her way, she would strip the past of all memory and replace it only with markers of what she takes to be the new civilization. In this way Christianity becomes a hidden force of colonialism. (37)

Whiteness, upward mobility, modernity, and Christianity all seem conflated under the pressure of recognition. As oppressed and subjugated peoples begin to see themselves through the eyes of the oppressor (or colonized and colonizer), they simultaneously face the temptation to subscribe to their values and opinions. Thus, resistance must first start at decolonizing the imagination. Hooks points out, "The film really touched upon the question of domestic colonization and how black people, like Haagar and like Viola internalize that sense of what culture is" (38).

This tension shapes the script. It asks the question, who or what determines our value, or identity, and our parameters for connection with each other? Who is the other? What is sacred? And more important, it asks to whose voice are we listening. The internal battles that must be waged to free Black folk from the bondage of past and present white

ambition are skillfully addressed though the dynamic of family and migration, religion and magic, Conjure and talking to the dead, and is, as Greg Tate argues, in a note just before the script in the book *The Making of an African American Woman's Film Daughters of the Dust*, "less about the horrors of the slave experience as the way of life than about how that horrific institution shaped the interior lives and life choices of the slaves and their descendants" (71). This is important because far too much energy is spent attempting to recite and make visible such horrors for white audiences and sensibilities. Rather than a push outward, a move inward is needed because we are in a much better position to affect change internally. The more we understand where our choices originate, the more we are empowered to modify those choices.

Moreover, just as expectation brings disappointment, it is the longing for recognition that brings alienation. Tate says:

> It is, finally, slavery that transformed African people into American products, enforcing a cultural amnesia that scraped away details without obliterating the core. We remain in a middle passage, living out an identity that is neither African or American, though we crave for both shores to claim us. It is *Daughter's* achievement to represent this double alienation as an issue for the community as a whole, and as personal and interpersonal issues for the film's principal characters. (71)

In other words, this longing for acceptance stems from the immense loss caused by slavery. However, the fragments of identity left behind should not be put back together by those who broke them in the first place. Instead, for Nana, it is memory, family,

community, and the spiritual/magical frequencies that tie them together that offer the healthiest path to identity.

In what follows, I will cover several moments from the screenplay demonstrate Nana Peazant's efficacy as an uncalled/conjure figure. Additionally, key moments in the novel address Nana's impact and the impact of heterodox Black religiosities, as well as the liberatory value of alternative creation stories and ways of perceiving. The contributions of LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant in *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music, and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women* also bring to the surface the benefits presented in the character of Nana Peazant and *Daughters of the Dust.*

Nana Peazant is 88 at the start of the film, and hers is the first voice heard, followed by the Unborn Child's. It exhibits and embraces the duality of what Henderson writes regarding "a dialogue with the aspects of 'otherness' within the self. The complex situatedness of the black woman as not only the 'Other' of the Same, but also as the 'other' of the other(s) implies . . . a relationship of difference and identification with the 'other(s)'"(17-18). Celebrating the complexity of being uncalled, Nana says not as the unnamed protagonist of *Invisible Man* out of a sense of lament, but as a proclamation, "I am the first and the last. I am the honored one and the scorned" (75). She identifies with both the transient and fickle negative and positive aspects of recognition while remaining centered in an internal identity that both precedes and supersedes any external designations. The films begins with this juxtaposition between the inner and outer perceptions of self. The juxtaposition also suggests that a different or new origin must be considered and is about to be introduced. Primarily this chapter will reference the

screenplay and not the visual text its self. I will highlight moments in the plot and the dialougue as well as discriptions that support my claim that Nana is in fact an uncalled figure like Minnie and Pilate.

The Unborn Child's voice takes over the narration and troubles the very notion of an origin. She claims her story begins on the eve of her family's migration north. "My story begins before I was born. My great-great-grandmother, Nana Peazant, saw her family coming apart. Her flowers to bloom in a distant frontier . . . And then, there was my ma and daddy's problem. Nana prayed and the old souls guided me into the New World" (80). While foreshadowing the conflict surrounding her parentage, her connection to her family, and the plot of the narrative, the Unborn Child also introduces two radically subversive concepts. The first is the nature of existence that she exists prior to, and outside of, normative understandings of life such as birth. There is a whole other world out there, for the one in which we walk is not the only one. The second concept is the power to relate to and influence other planes of existence. The radical implications of Nana's being able to both communicate with a life yet to be born and to guide it present a radical shift in what can be perceived as real and as possible. Like Old Wife and Pilate's father, the Unborn Child represents an alternate relationship with those who are no longer or not yet alive. Likewise, Nana's relationship with her great-great-granddaughter marks her as an uncalled spiritual practitioner who is able to wield otherworldly power and affect change in this one.

Nana Peazant, realizing her time on this plane of existence is short and fearing for the well-being of her family as many of them prepare to leave, makes plans to deploy this

power. She reveals, “Now everything they own is all boxed up, packed up, and ready to head North . . . But when they come today to kiss these old withered-up cheeks bye-bye, I’m going to have something more than farewell waiting on them. Ya see, I’ve been working on a plan” (87). Nana is intent on protecting the lot even as many of them actively rebel and dismiss the matriarch’s teachings. Though they are leaving to the mainland, Nana still believes she has the power to influence them from afar. Family and the unending connection that that concept represents for Nana is central. Referring to her deceased husband, Nana confesses, “I visit with old Peazant every day since the day he died. It’s up to the living to keep in touch with the dead, Eli. Man’s power doesn’t end with death. We just move on to a new place, a place where we watch over our living family” (93). As Nana attempts to explain to Eli the responsibility and scope of familial bonds, even in “death,” this world and the next/other are placed in a peculiar proximity that almost denies a distinction.

The first main moment from the screenplay to be considered is Nana’s conversation with Eli at the grave of her late husband. They discuss Eli’s anxiety surrounding Eula’s pregnancy. Nana attempts to reassure him: “You’re worried that baby Eula’s carrying isn’t yours . . . because she got forced . . . Eli, you won’t ever have a baby that wasn’t sent to you . . . The ancestors and the womb . . . they’re one, they’re the same . . . Those in this grave, like those who’re across the sea, they’re with us. They’re all the same” (94-5). Beyond the reassurance, Nana here provides a realignment of Eli’s perception of human life and its interconnectedness. Those who have come, are yet to come, and are far off are all connected. And the notion that the baby is “sent” strips away

the presumed power of these worldly forces to interfere with Black familial bonds. Nana repeats, “The ancestors and the womb are one” (95). And she implores, “Call on your ancestors, Eli. Let them guide you. You need their strength. Eli, I need you to make the family strong again, like we used to be” (95).

Unfortunately, her encouragement is met with further skepticism and confusion. Eli has grown disconnected from Nana’s teachings. In what seems like a crisis of faith, Eli lashes out, “How can you understand me in the way I feel?” (95), and in an ironic attempt to point out the pain of his wife he ends up pointing out his own. He exclaims, “This happened to my wife. My wife! I don't feel like she's mine anymore. When I look at her, I feel I don't want her anymore” (95). Nana quickly corrects him, “You can't give back what you never owned. Eula never belonged to you; she married you” (95). This is important because it shows the residue of white patriarchy’s print on the conceptions of Black male masculinity and Black women's corrective power by way of Nana Peazant, the uncalled figure.

Eli then shifts the blame to Nana, and while acknowledging her as such a figure, questions why and how such a thing could have happened. He asks her, “Why didn't you protect us, Nana? Did someone put the fix on me? Was it the conjure? Or bad luck? Or were the old souls too deep in their graves to give a damn about my wife while some stranger was riding her?” (95) Even in doubting her spiritual ability to protect them (as if he too were raped), he still ascribes the event to something spiritual in origin. Conjure was still the interpretive framework in which he processed trauma. He then recounts his

childhood to Nana and how great an impact, she as a spiritual practitioner, had on him. He laments:

> When we were children, we really believed you could work the good out of evil. We believed in the new spirit on the walls . . . Your tree of glass jars and bottles . . . The rice you carried in your pockets. We believed in the frizzled-haired chickens . . . The coins, the roots and the flowers. We believed they would protect us and every little thing we owned or loved. I wasn't scared of anything because I knew . . . I knew my great-grandmother had it all in her pocket, or could work it up. (95-6)

Eli's words here bear witness to Nana's being viewed as this powerful uncalled/conjure figure with the ability to "work it up," to protect, and to control what would happen to the family. Eli's lament also signals Nana's critical role in passing on ancient knowledge and spiritual practices designed to offer the historically dispossessed access to magic and traditions that offered a modicums of empowerment, safety, and peace. Unfortunately, at this point of uncertainty, Eli does not completely reject Nana and her ways, or at least Nana does not give up on reaching Eli and continues to try and shape his perspective and expectations. Nana urges, "Eli, never forget who we are and how far we've come" (96). Eli responds, "I have to leave here. I don't have any other choice" (96).

Nana's warning is grounded in the idea of memory and how it affects identity. She says, "Eli . . . Eli! There's a thought . . . A recollection . . . Something somebody remembers. We carry these memories inside of us. . . We don't know where the recollections came from. Sometimes we dream them. But we carry these memories inside

of us." (97) "Inside" signifies a focus on the interiority of subject formation: a journey inward to insulate against the dangers inherent in the assimilation efforts of Western thought and values; it is a connection to a past that is also present, an alternate frame of reference for being. This is what Nana is gesturing toward.

Eli responds, "What're we supposed to remember, Nana? How, at one time we were able to protect those we loved? How, in Africa world we were kings and queens and built great big cities?" (97). Nana insists, "Eli . . . I'm trying to teach you how to touch your own spirit. I'm fighting for my life, Eli, and I'm fighting for yours. Look in my face! I'm trying to give you something to take North with you, along with all your great big dreams . . . Call on those old Africans, Eli. They'll come to you when you least expect them" (97). Nana, as the uncalled figure here, highlights her role as an advocate and protector, but then insists on the necessity and Eli's ability to advocate for himself, to "touch [his] own spirit." The responsibility is his alone, yet with his connection to the ancestors through memory he will not actually be alone.

This notion of personal responsibility fostered and encouraged by a conjure/spiritual practitioner, or what I have been calling an "uncalled figure," harkens back to Chapter One and Minnie Ransom's question to a weary Velma Henry, "Are you sure, sweetheart, that you want to be well?" (Bambara 3). Minnie asks this question because she knows it is Velma who will have to do the work required for healing. She knows that Velma must be the one to take a journey inward toward wholeness. Likewise, Nana is trying to redirect Eli's focus. She knows that in her absence he will have a responsibility both to his own wellness and to the family that accompanies him to the

mainland. Of the ancestors' value, Nana reassures Eli, "They'll hug you up quick and soft like the warm sweet wind. Let those old souls coming to your heart, Eli. Let them touch you with the hands of time. Let them feed your head with wisdom that ain't from this day and time. Because when you leave this island, Eli Peazant, you ain't going to no land of milk and honey" (96-7). This reassurance is also tied to a cautionary statement coded in a biblical reference to Moses' conversation with God at the Burning Bush. God reveals to Moses His plans for the enslaved children of Israel: "So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Exodus 3:8). In her conversation with Eli, Nana invokes both conjure tradition and Christian mythology in an effort to communicate to Eli the importance of maintaining a sense of cultural community and spiritual continuity. Nana concludes, "'Eli, I'm putting my trust in you to keep the family together up North. That's the challenge facing all you free Negroes. Celebrate our ways'" (97). What appears to be the priority are familial connections and uncalled perceptions.

In addition to this conversation with Eli, Nana is repeatedly presented as an uncalled/conjure figure. According to the script, in one of the scene directions, the camera focuses in on Nana's "Conjure bag," a tin canister. Inside the canister are "Nana's scraps of memories, bits and pieces of Pleasant Family memorabilia passed down through the centuries. Nana removes and African lock, a piece of her mother's hair she studies at closely" (97-8).

The film gives a variety of different perspectives, and Nana is not the only one to talk to the dead. Eula tells Yellow Mary that she spoke to her ma. She wrote to her, and

she came right away. She says, “I needed to see my mom. I needed to talk to her. So I wrote her a letter put it beneath the bed with a glass of water, and I waited. I waited, and my mama came to me. She came to me right away” (119). Eula’s Unborn Child also had to communicate with another realm. She recalls, “I remember how important the children were to the Peazant family . . . And how I had to convince my daddy that I was his child" (124). However, like Eli, there are some (many of whom plan on going to the mainland) who confirm Nana’s position as an important conjure figure, but with disdain. Haagar insists, “I'm an educated person . . . And I'm tired of Nana's old stories. Watching her make those root potions . . . And that hoodoo she talks about" (130). Whether by camera direction, self-declaration, skeptical pushback, or embarrassment, Nana Peazant is identified by others as an uncalled figure.

The uncalled figure and the Unborn Child work together to bring forth life and changes in others. The Unborn Child recalls, “My mom said she could feel me by her side . . . I remember the call of my great-great grandmother. I remember the journey home. I remember the long walk to the graveyard . . . To the house I would be born in . . . To the picnic site. I remember, and I recall” (154). Nana Peazant calls the Unborn Child forth.

Nana seeks to redress the strife dividing her family. Drawn away by promises of a “better life” and Western values, the Peazant family is threatened by judgment and division. Nana shares her concerns, “I can't understand how me and Peazant put your children here on earth to fight among yourselves. How you can leave this soil . . . this soil. The sweat of our love, it's here in this soil. I love you cause you're mine. You're the

fruit of an ancient tree" (154). Nana claims them as her fruit—another biblical reference—and wants them to stop fighting. She warns, “I'm not going to be watching from Heaven while there's soil still here for me for planting” (159). Her connection to the land is sacred and shifts the focus back to an alternate spiritual tradition. This is something that Manigault-Bryant points out about *Daughters of the Dust,* using one of the same texts from Chapter One namely, *Black Magic*. She states:

> According to Yvonne Chireau, [*Daughters*] is an important resource for interpreting religious signifiers and African-American culture. And black magic religion in the African American Conjuring tradition Chireau emphasizes the film’s concluding scene were Nana's gift coupled with the young women's departure from the island signals the merging of religion and magic. (1)

Furthermore, Manigault-Bryant argues that “Nana's charm allows the family to collectively remember their past as participants in conjuring and faith traditions while celebrating an unknown future" (1). Moreover, “Chireau suggest that *Daughters of the Dust* might be read as an allegory of the religious sojourn of blacks in America, with Nana's charm as a metaphor for the Legacy and some of his chosen to preserve and others to reject’” (1). This combination of divergent religious practices and mythologies is emblematic of who an uncalled figure is and how they operate in the world. On the last day, Nana intends to perform a ritual of protection over those who are leaving. Nana holds up the hand she has made. With the St. Christopher charm wrapped around it, she takes Viola's Bible and lays the hand on top of it. Then with a firm grip, Nana takes hold of Bilal's shoulder and says, “We've taken old Gods and given and are giving them new

names. They saw it all here that day, those Ibo" (159). The power to rename and repurpose spiritual practices is an example of heterodox Black religiosities and the figure of the uncalled. These religious traditions fall outside of the scope of dominant Western articulations of Christianity, or what is acceptable.

Manigault-Bryant, writing about the Gullah/Geechee women she studied, maintains:

> Culture keepers are inextricably tied to their Christian faith. Yet we would be remiss if we overlooked the ways that the Christian faith they have inherited has historical connections to antecedents in local folk tradition. No exploration of Gullah/Geechee religious practice is therefore complete without an extensive discussion of conjure; even the earliest descriptions of low-country religion reference the blending of Christianity was local ideas of "superstition." (68)

Tying Manigault-Bryant's research back to the film, I would highlight Nana's actions: "She holds her hand on top of all this Bible out to her family. We hear the sound of other black families in the region giving voice to field cries. Cries that fall upon the Peazant Family gathering as a blessing. 'This hand, it's from me, from us, from them the Ibo. . . Just like all of you. . . Come children, kiss this hand full of me'" (159). This is difficult for some as Viola was set off again by Nana's root working. Viola exclaims, "Lord, have mercy, have mercy" (159). According to the script, "Like those old Ibos, Nana Peazant calls upon the womb of time to help shatter the temporal restrictions of her own existence to become a being who is beyond death, beyond aging, beyond time" (160). She holds up the hand and Bible and instructs them to take her hand. She says, "I'm the one that can

give you strength" (160), and the family comes forward to kiss the hand. Nana pleads with Haagar and the others to "Take me wherever you go. I am your strength" (160). She concludes by reassuring and reminding them of their connection: "Come child I love you cuz you're mine" (160).

Nana's strong connection to and desire for her family to stay together and stop fighting can be best understood if we start at the "beginning." Though written as a sequel that takes place twenty years after the events of the film of the same name, the novel, *Daughters of the Dust,* actually tells of a time before the film, before everything, even, "fore de Bible" (12). In the chapter "Dawtuh Island, 1912," a story is told by an old friend of Nana Peazant's, Miz Emma Julia. She is pressed by the young children of the island to tell a "lie," another word for "story," on the island. The children use flattery: "Nobody tell lies as good as you" (10). As she leans back in her chair and listens to "the sounds and rhythms" of the children, she sleeps, and when she awakens, she asks, "So ya'll ready for de lie?" (10) Like the Conjure and Christianity that is mixed by Nana, Miz Emma Julia introduces an origin story that reclaims the power of creation from dominant protestant Judeo-Christian mythologies; however, when questioned about it, she denies there is a conflict. She starts by saying:

> "Dis lie begin at de beginning of dis world fore we know it. It begin fore de Bible."
>
> Pap, shocked, piped up, "Want nuttin fore de Bible! What I tell you?' Want nuttin fore the Bible! Preacher Wilson tole me dat!" Pap insisted.

"Boy, hush up! Dis ain't got nuttin to do against de Bible!" Elizabeth scolded him. Pap started to fuss back at her, but remembering all the work he had done in the yard, decided to hold peace. "Like I say . . . dis before de Bible. Dis was de time when dere were nuttin but land as far as you could see."

"Where was de big water?"

"What I say, boy? Dere was no river, no creek, no big water, nuttin but de land all over de whole world. Y'all hear what I say?"

Elizabeth spoke up. "Us hear you!" . . . Miz Emma Julia turned to Clarice and Pap. "Ya'll wit me on de lie? I ain't heah yall wit me!" . . .

"Us wit you! Us wit you!" (12)

Now, with the consent of her little listeners, she tells a lie-story about an old lady who lived alone in the woods. A woman who is so "lonesome" she cannot stop crying and "as it happened de elephants was passing, an de big elephant heard she and say, 'Why you cry like dat?' Her say, 'Cause I lonely. Don't have nobody to care bout and nobody to care for!' (12) The elephant's solution is family. The elephant says, "What you need is kin. Kin keep you from bein lonely" (13). When the old woman replies to the elephant that she had no husband to create such a family, the elephant leaves to consult with the other elephants and comes back with a solution: "[H]im come back and him say, 'We hear dat if you take de five nuts from de hickory tree an put dem in a ball of clay and throw dem in de fire and let dem stay for three days, kin will come to you'" (13). The old woman protests that she is too old to go so far to find the hickory tree, but the elephant assures her this is the only way for her to get a family. Before she leaves, the elephant warns her:

“’One thing to remember, kin is fine, but kin can be trouble.’ Den him run off to catch up” (13).

The woman ends up doing as the elephant tells her, and it works. She is granted many children and for a time is happy. Unfortunately, they all soon begin fighting, and this constant conflict quickly begins to grieve the old woman greatly. She starts to cry again, and one day, as Miz Emma Julia tells the children sitting there hanging on each word of the lie, the same elephant walks by and asks her what's wrong. She tells the elephant that her children won't stop fighting. The elephant reminds the old woman that “kin can be trouble” but later comes back with a solution to get her children to stop fighting (14-5). The elephant has the woman send her children away into different directions to gather different things.

> Once de children were gone, de elephants come together an begin to stomp de ground. Dey stomp so hard, de land begin to crack an break off. De woman cry, “What you doin? My chilren!”
>
> De elephant say, “Dis de only way to stop fightin.” Dey stomp an mountains break away, den de desert break away, den de woods, de grasslands, de hills. De children come run to de edge an see de others so far away dey start to cry. (15)

The old woman’s and her children’s tears began to fill up the gaps in between the land, which breaks away with water. Then: “Dey cry a whole world full of tears. An when her cried out, her asked de elephant, ‘Will us ever by together again?’ An him say, ‘Will dey ever stop fightin?’” (15). Miz Emma Julia says that that the old woman was still waiting

for her children to stop fighting and come home and reveals to the eager yet perplexed ears that "'You is her children . . . And you . . . All of us is her children. . .' She leaned back and examined the children's faces" (15). Filled with dissatisfaction, the children ask, "Will you tell us another lie tomorrow?" (16).

This story represents an alternative origin story for humanity, one that is grounded in family and the regret and compulsion for familial conflict. As a lie or a story that is passed on from generation to generation by an uncalled figure, this origin story can subvert hegemonic values and definitions that promote anti-Black thought and external claims to Black identity formation.

Elizabeth Peazant, one of the main characters in *Daughters,* is able to trace her tools of radical resistance back to the matriarch Nana:

> It was she that Nana taught to identify and find the roots, herbs, flowers, the porcupine quills, the beak of the wood duck, and the feather from the snipe used to make the charms that would keep evil and bad times from the Peazant family. Elizabeth knew of roots that worked for the good and even roots that were said to bring illness and bad fortune. (22)

It is only after Nana has crossed over that her old friend, Miz Emma Julia, takes it upon herself to continue Elizabeth's training. It was from her that Elizabeth learned of the roots that could make a man stay true, cure a child's meanness, or free a woman of carnal restraint. Elizabeth quietly watches as people from all over the island and from the mainland visit Miz Emma Julia's house and leave. It is what she seeks in her root work:

her own peace (22). This magical power has potential to bring inner peace and collective protection.

When Elizabeth returns to the island, she "led a treasure hunt among her youngest brothers and sister to collect bottles to fill the trees, explaining that the tree provided magic protection for their family. Racing barefoot along the beach, they searched for bottles that had washed ashore" (23). Twenty years later, Nana's influence is still felt. The heterodox Black religiosities and spiritual traditions find new practitioners and continue to meet the needs of the community. Whether by way of Nana Peazant, Miz Emma Julia, or Elizabeth Peazant, counter-narratives and ways of being in the world circulate throughout the island and in the minds of the youth so that even if they were to leave, they would—if called upon—possess the necessary capacity to resist and reject popular Black longings for white recognition.

In addition to Conjure's ability to provide protection and bring peace, Manigault-Bryant argues in *Talking to the Dead*:

> One of the reasons that conjure, voodoo, and superstition have remained such prominent features of Gullah/Geechee religiosity is partially because folk customs were so prevalent and presumably powerful. A second and equally significant reason is that introducing lowcountry blacks to Christianity was not largely favored or supported by whites in South Carolina before the 1830s. Slave owners were unwilling to allow their slaves to attend church meetings or be baptized, as they feared that their baptism would require that the enslaved be manumitted; many planters did not want the plantation's operating schedule interrupted for the

> slave to receive instruction and slaveholders were concerned about the egalitarian implications of Christianity. (90)

In other words:

> Talking to the dead exemplifies the Synergy of folk religion and Christian theological practice, and remains an integral part of the Gullah/Geechee religion. . . . As lived and experienced by these women, talking to the dead challenges traditional definitions of the terms 'talking' and 'dead' and ruptures normative translations of these words . . . It is through this four-tiered process—openness, acknowledgement, acceptance, and communication—that these women connect to those who are gone yet still remain. (103-5)

*Daughter of the Dust* offers yet another example of a liberatory practice grounded in a radical Black collectivity free of patriarchy that exists today, yet goes under-theorized and largely ignored due to the shadow of liberal forms of recognition-based protest. The aim of this chapter is to show an inner path to wholeness and freedom that is not concerned with or dependent on external recognition. Nana Peazant highlights the power African American practitioners of Christianity, conjure, and magic possessed in this realm and in others, for self and for loved-ones. She operates outside of normative frameworks of acceptance.

**Conclusion: So, What Now?**

My dissertation now concludes with an examination of the frequency of love, self-love and creating, radical and subversive collectivity, and a viable alternative to recognition-based forms of popular Black protest. I hope to have offered an alternative that looks inward rather than outward for freedom, an alternative that does not underpin the very structures it hopes to defeat. What I am suggesting is a recalibration, a shift in the way we imagine our options for resistance, a refocusing of what we see as the answer to the problem of white supremacist power over Black lives. But what now? How does this relate to actual Black lives in and outside of the academy? How can this apply to today's social movements? Why is such a realignment of the aims and strategies of Black freedom struggles so necessary?

Black folk around the globe, and in the United States in particular, live under an oppressive system of white supremacy logics that threatens not only their material existence, but also their intellectual and spiritual capacity for identity formation and wholeness. I came to this project as a student of history as well as of the present after seeing an unacceptable amount of overlap in the mistreatment of my people from chattel slavery to the 2014 murder of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice at the hands of the police (among countless other young Black men, women, girls, and boys) and beyond. Having long been socialized by such state-sanctioned violence in my own life, what struck me as odd were the public responses to it. In an era where nearly everyone has a camera phone, and these acts of violence are now easily recorded and subsequently go viral, it seemed

that the majority of the radical energy and protests that would follow each incident of social injustice were entrenched in calls for white recognition.

This was clearly not a new strategy. Through marches, riots, sit-ins, die-ins, countless rallies, and speeches, Black folk and their allies in social justice made it their primary focus to educate, rebuke, and implore white people and institutions to recognize the inhumane way Blacks people were being treated and do something about it. This goal seems to have changed little from the ways of anti-slavery propaganda and the popular slave narratives of Harriet Ann Jacobs Incidents and Frederick Douglass. Black folks must get white folks to view them as fully human.

My response, which is in no way unique or new, is why? Their opinion should not make us any more or less human. The objective is based on a false premise. It is not that they do not know we are human, it is that they do not care, and furthermore that they benefit from not acknowledging it. Even before I read Hegel, Fanon, and Coulthard or anything regarding recognition, it just did not seem right. Our recognition of our own humanity seems of much greater import. The acceptance that came from an internal assessment seemed to me a better use of our collective resources and imagination. Since, begging (asking for/demanding something with no real ability to enforce said demand) appears to actually strengthen oppressive structures of power by affirming its position over you to, in fact, grant you something in the first place, I thought it apt to first heal the wounds among ourselves that said we had to operate out of a sense of lack. A lack of lack, or wholeness could, then, never come from without. It had to come from within. I sought to find examples in literature and history of such an alternative.

While researching previous forms of Black resistance, freedom fighting, and spiritual practices and attempting to think toward better, I noticed two things: patriarchy's hold in Black liberation struggles have to go, and we already have working formulas for freedom that may become far more effective than the current liberal forms of recognition-based protest. I noticed that, as Audre Lorde points out in "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," the "tools of the racist patriarchy" can only allow for the "most narrow perimeters of change" (110-1). And, "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist" (112). Unfortunately, ridding ourselves of an unhealthy and non-mutual longing for white recognition is not the only obstacle to Black liberation. Lorde argues:

> Women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate them, educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns . . . a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought. (113)

This is important not only because it articulates and makes visible the problems with patriarchy's being used to combat racial inequities, but there is the danger of being so caught up in educating men in this sense of whiteness or white folk. It is a diversion of energies. And I have been, like Lorde here, attempting to redirect such energies, to a quite similar place. She urges "each one of us here to reach down into the deep place of

knowledge inside herself and touch that terror and loathing of any difference that lives there. See whose face it wears. Then the personal as the political can begin to illuminate all our choices" (113). A trek inward is what we need, and Black women's writings, voices, and thoughts hold our best chances of making such a journey. As Black men we must check and educate ourselves about the ways in which we are complicit in the silencing and devaluing of Black women. We need to adjust our values.

In her 1982 speech "Learning from the '60s," Lorde puts it this way, "As Black people, but there is one thing we can learn from the 60s, it is how infinitely complex any move for liberation must be. For we must move against not only those forces which dehumanize us from the outside, but also against those oppressive values which we have been forced to take into ourselves" (135). This inward analysis applies to the person and the collective. We must look inward and nurture each element of ourselves apart from white approval and patriarchal values.

To do this we need what Chela Sandoval argues for in *Methodology of the Oppressed,* a "break with ideology" (42). She explains that "The idea here [is] that the citizen-subject can learn to identify, develop, and control the means of ideology" (42). In Althusser's terms, "the model [she] proposes would be considered a 'science' of oppositional ideology, one that apprehends an effective oppositional consciousness igniting in dialectical engagement between varying ideological formations" (42-3). In other words, the ability to not get bogged down into just one theoretical framework and instead shift back and forth between different ideological and liberatory strategies might just prove more effective. Sandoval's study "identifies five principal categories around

which oppositional consciousness is organized, and which are politically effective means for transforming dominant power relations. [She] characterize these as the 'equal rights,' 'revolutionary,' 'separatist,' and 'differential' forms of oppositional consciousness" (42-3). This is a strategic movement that Anzaldua calls “weaving 'between and among' oppositional ideologies. . . tactical weaponry for intervening in shifting currents of power” (57). Before setting out to correct how other choose to view us, we must first through a set of “processes, procedures, and technologies [decolonize our] imagination" (68)

In Pauli Murray’s “Perfecting Our Strategy” challenges the traditional NAACP tactic of “concentrating on the *equal* side of the *Plessy* equation” (221). Her approach was “considered too visionary, one likely to precipitate an unfavorable decision of the Supreme Court, thus strengthening rather than destroying the force of the *Plessy* case” (221). Murray ended up being correct, but her voice was not heard. We must learn how to not only listen to Black women’s voices when it comes to liberation strategy, but also take chances and learn how to move in and around dominant strategies of freedom fighting that pass as conventional wisdom that is beyond reproach.

Cornel West, in his 1982 *Prophecy Deliverance!*, attempts to put forth an “Afro-American philosophy that is essentially a specific expression of contemporary American philosophy which takes seriously the Afro-American experience” (11). His primary objective is “neither to achieve scientific status nor to acquire professional acceptance, but rather to aspire toward a demystifying hermeneutic of the Afro-American experience which enhances the cause of human freedom” (11). In Chapter 3, “The Four Traditions of

Response," he puts forward an "interpretation and a description of the Afro-American experience in the light of the black reactions and responses to the modern justifications of the idea of white supremacy initiated in enlightened Europe and inseminated in the slavery-ridden United States" (69). He argues that there were four different types of Black responses, or theoretical constructs that, "embodied distinct Afro-American historical traditions of thought and action . . . [the] exceptionalist, assimilationist, marginalist, and humanist traditions" (70). He then defines each one. But what I find interesting is West's conception of the four.

He maintains that these traditions assume "that culture is more fundamental than politics in regard to Afro-American self-understanding" (71). It presupposes that Afro-American cultural perceptions provide a broader and richer framework for understanding the Afro-American experience than do political perceptions. As I noted earlier, culture and politics are inseparable, but as Antonio Gramsci has shown, any political consciousness of an oppressed group is shaped and molded by the group's cultural resources and resiliency as perceived by the individuals in it. So the extent to which the resources and resiliency are romanticized, rejected, or accepted will deeply influence the kind of political consciousness that individuals possess" (71). At the end, he argues, "Afro-American philosophy deems the norms of humanist tradition desirable" (91). But why? He continues, "These norms of individuality and democratic control of the political and productive process are acceptable because they promote personal development, cultural growth, and human freedom. They foster the fulfillment of the potentialities and capacities of all individuals, encourage innovation" (91). This does not seem very

liberatory. It merely reads as a “freedom” still defined by Western values, and thus is not freedom at all. It is as Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* puts it (albeit in the settler colonial context), "independence has brought moral compensation to colonized peoples, and has established their dignity. But they have not yet had time to elaborate a society or to build up and affirm values" (81). It is this ability to shape our own values that I find so critical to thinking Black liberation and why I find recognition-based forms of protest so counterproductive. Though belonging has a powerful pull and immediacy in fulfilling material needs, it is with the psychic, spiritual, and emotional needs we ought to start through self as well as a radical Black sociality that wholeness and true freedom can take place.

In conclusion, to recap, I have attempted to place my inquiry of minor, or heterodox, Black Christianities within a larger conversation about the politics of recognition where the desire to be seen and treated as human within a state to which the appeals for recognition are directed and from which they are denied often prove inadequate or limited as modes for liberation. This project considers the complexities of how African American literature interacts with the notion of what I have termed uncalling, made visible by the heterodox Christianities that fall out of the scope of the Black church and move past the dominant parameters of the trope to a space of possibility for radical Black sociality. I have analyzed Black religiosity as an enactment of radical Black collectivity in contradistinction to a politics of recognition. And I have attempted to show that this figure of the uncalled—operating out of heterodox Black religiosities—can offer an alternative model for liberation and healing. This model, which

is not bound up in outward cries for recognition, already exists as an alternate form of protest that is underutilized due to the immense benefits that the state gains by fanning the flames for recognition that is withheld or granted on its own singularly one-sided terms. My intervention comes, then, in thinking recognition and Black protest in the U.S. alongside Black spiritual belief systems in African American literature. There appears to be a gap in critical attention to the politics of recognition in the field of African American literature or contemporary Black freedom struggles. Therefore, the limits lead to an opportunity to explore an even less interrogated notion—an alternative to recognition. I refer to the creative power available in the noncanonical spiritual practices of Black folk in the realm of the unseen that hold the possibilities of redefinition, control, healing, and protection against the onslaught of white supremacist oppression. Summed up in a popular Black phase "You can't see me!", and I don't need you to!

This project is far from complete (in depth, nor in breadth), however it marks the beginnings of my inquiry and contribution. With that admitted, I shift from proses to poetry and end this chapter with two of my most recent and relevant spoken word pieces on the issue of protest, recognition, and Blackness.

# INJUSTICE

My son's name is
Michael "Justice" Ajani Sterling

Michael, after his grandfather
Not to mention, Jordan, Jackson, and Tyson

See he came out fighting…
Cause nowadays
Lil black boys don't get no Justice
Instead. They get profiled, stereotyped, devalued, and taken from us
Now take it from us… that ain't no way to live
An existence less than tentative
Walking on bullet shells, still wearing bibs
Went from killing our leaders… to killing our kids
Oh what a privileged it is…or must be, not to have to relate

Misguided and misinformed, watch how complicity makes way for hate
While pigment or class helps the fortunate to better insulate
It's been going on for years, but only now is it a topic for national debate
And Facebook revolutionaries are talking about share this meme, video, or photo before it's too late!

It's funny though, how one's fate
can depend solely on the irrational fear, prejudice plus + power assigns to each individual's face

But we're the ones trippen (huh?), asking for it,
and preoccupied with race
Or some kind of unjustified angst-

Stop it, I can't breath, or reach my skittles,
swinging at the playground playing with my new "toy" pistol
See, I can't help, but to feel, like you're missing the issue
Then again this really ain't about you, your ability to empathize, or be more precise when you generalize.

Nor is it my responsibility to make you confront the error, in your own lies
Or comfort you …just because you walked with a few signs
Stop posing for pictures and, Open ya eyes!
Actually open ya ears, and let in the cries
And please put away this popular post racial, propaganda that populates my timeline

We talk about the injustice of how he died
And #hashtag "black lives matter" or "still I rise"
Then you reply, "All lives matter. . .stop trying to divide."…
"Worry about gangstas and 'Black on black crime'"

Now that's fine…though unrelated, and an intellectual waste of time
As it's not at all unique, in comparison to the scale of white on white crime
Not to mention, I thought we held police to a higher standard than
Everyday citizens who actually get prosecuted, and later held accountable for their crimes
No? Not this time? I see. I see.
The prison industrial complex was created for folk that look like me …I got it.

I guess you could say, I just take issue with our strategy.
Reluctant to recycle the tactics of yesterday…
As if the enemy is not prepared, protected and more concerned with today
Far from frightened by our marches, riots and fledgling displays--of solidarity--
Especially, while the settler state controls the media and how we are portrayed

No, No, No shade,
However, I'm a little ambivalent about what I see on the news, and the internets
Some, think these protests are amazing, and others pointless-
Some, wanted to boycott black Friday, while others saw that as useless-
Some, actually believe that if we put our hands up and yell "don't shoot!"….
they'd listen, and decide not to abuse us-
Others still, even more clueless, maintain this is the same,
as Claudette fighting for her seat on the bus-
Thus, advocate for non-violence, walkouts, die ins and wait, for the right one to represent us
Then… there are those more inclined to mistrust,

like when my father was a Panther
They just **shot back!** and shouted "Yall ain't fittin ta wop us!"

Yup! A lot of people like the way that sound
Except, the people who argue it's the government instigating a race war
to get troops on the ground-

Which would mean previously there was some form of peace going around?
But who knows?

Nevertheless, what are you gonna do when the National Guard runs up in your town?
And youngsters come up missin
Innocent, but no where to be found,
Tell me, is that really how it all goes down?

Is that why the Patriot Act was written?
Now I know how them patriots gonna act,
but who all gets to be a citizen?
Sounds a little **suspect,** when anyone can be a **suspect** or should I say **domestic subject**, but maybe I'm just trippin?
Or maybe I'm just upset that so many of my brotha's and sista's,
that's right and sista's end up in the street bleedin-
Beyond the pathos of a mother grieving
I'm past perplexed at what I'm seeing
The targeted extermination of a select group of human beings.

In Fact, one could even argue that it's dangerous, just to be Black, but

How do WE respond and not react?
How do WE move forward and not back?
How do WE come together, and stay on track?

"Unity"
I understand as thee,
collective opportunity to ignore differences and strategically build community.
Yet, some might say there's no such thing-
and that there are better ways to organize complex formations of identity-

But then, that's all theory-
and doesn't account for what transpires when the person with the GUN!.....IS AFRAID of ME!

See I also heard it said that:
All cops aren't bad.
And all whites aren't racist...

Well, since we are stating the obvious
Not all accusations are baseless
And not all systemic structures of racisms are faceless
But as we know, absolutes seldom lead to winning statements
And tactics like those merely deflect- genuine engagement
As well as reflect- an ignorance of the cases, their own subject position, and what race is.

And then there are people who- don't like living in a police state and feel caged
But don't mind patrolling and policing what you post on your page.
Enraged! if they see you're not doing your part
As if awareness alone is where we end. and not start....

And it breaks my heart
We've got problems, but no solutions
And instead of an active, and involved Revolution
It seems we've gladly accepted "comments" or "likes" as our virtual substitution
So I ask...what are we doing?

But, I ain't got all the answers
like Kanye told Sway
Just disturbed by the injustices of our day-
And some of the things,
some people had to say
So I sift through several circular and shallow arguments to clear the way
For some critical thinking can go ahead and take place

However, I got good news
And that's that My God is a JUST God!

**Which means**, if you're a Christian, you're allowed to do more than just pray
But "Turn the other check" is what you say
without the proper Jewish context and sloppily apply it to today.
But hey, He ain't call us to be no fool
When the Bible says to "die daily" **it's a metaphor**. It don't mean....just let um kill you

Or turn a blind eye, hide behind your faith and oversimplify. Get scared and not try
Blame the victim, with "just comply"
**See I care**, and you ask why?

Did you think it was just my enemies? Hardly,
I got a license to love my people **too**
Partly- because fighting against racialized oppression ain't nothing **new**

It's something Moses, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, all went through
And wasn't it Apostle Paul who
said he'd rather be cursed for his people's sake?
and Jesus, didn't He rush to the cross to get his hands dirty
not worried about the rust on the stakes?

Yes, I believe so, so whatever it takes- I'm **gone act-**
and fight for my people to be treated equal until he gets back?

That's my pact-
Actually, I'm gonna make a plaque that reads:
My son's name is **Michael "Justice" Ajani Sterling**
**Ajani,** it's west African for "he who wins a **struggle"**
and His Mother and I weren't referring about no mere **scuffle**
see this boy, this boys is going to be **humble** but dedicated to the **destruction of injustice** and watching it **crumble!**

**Sterling** well that's the clan-
And "The Plan" is that he grows in wisdom and stature
and **actually makes it** to become a man-
His name is a prayer -and now we end where we first began**. . . With Justice!**

**1981**
**(A Critique of Black History Month)**

I was six the day James Baldwin died,
and fifteen in 96 when Tupac's mother cried.
Turned 20 in 20 01 when Bush lied,
and today-- in a world where Black lives don't matter-- I'm pushing 35.
But I digress, and rewind
as I position my birth against and alongside
several prominent figures and events across time.

Thus, cataloging and commenting on the context-- each text-- provides
Until I reach back and find the jewels popular history far too often, elides.
And then I'm done.

The year was 1981.
40 plus years after Richard Wright wrote his controversial --protest Novel, *Native Son*
Some 2,000 years after Jesus rose from the grave, as God's only begotten Son.
Which was around.... 320 years, before the Romans thought it just might be fun
To go on ahead and change the Sabbath to sunday in honor of,
and for the worshiping of the Sun (among .....other things)...like spreading the gospel through violence as a pretense until some new land was won
and the "Good News" eclipsed

Come Come now...it came with wips....
500 years before I got to the planet
that same warped rationale had my ancestors chained up on ships,
With their Humanity all but dismissed.
But, before I cause your delicate sense abilities to completely run amiss
Follow me... as the timeline shifts

.....to .....1862
3 years before the civil war was over,
4 years overdue.
Which was only, 121 years before I turned 2

Yet, that's the year Ida B. Wells-Barnett. was born, born to rebel and fight for those caught in the net that jim crow set, Or should I say noose? Highlighting the contradictions left over, after the north and south called their truce.
Only to let loose new forms of discrimination, hatred, and abuse.

So, Go Tell it on the Mountain, tell um it's gonna be The Fire Next Time. The next time someone calls me or Du Bois a problem. But, while the Souls of Black folk

and Hurston were Watching God white supremacist logics, tried to hide behind the Invisible man, and profit. On both sides of the color line.

Steering the narrative in a circle, until its hard to tell when they lying.
Hard to stop when we're crying...
and it's far from okay that we're dying.

Yet, I heard some of us got up and just started flying! Singing Songs with Solomon thanks to Morrison 13 years before I turned 9. Or Eating Salt with Bambara and finally finding healing after hard times

Then, in 1989 the earth shook,
and Sterling Brown took, his last breath. The death, of a Strong Man and poet.
But, before you know it, a year passes and Mandela is released.... Peace!

Six years later, Desmond Tutu presided over some of the sorriest settler propaganda to eva pass itself off as truth .....and reconciliation
an abortion of Justice
and I promise I'm not just hatin.
It was Absurd!
Got the oppressors on the stand,
bragging through statements
Neva held accountable or vanquished!
While Survivors sit there stumbling through anguish
Back in California.... I'm 14. Turning off the tv and tryin to register my amazement.

What if payback wasn't a payment?
And Amerikkkan history wasn't just foul,
but a flagrant
And our genius well established in greatness...
Not new, novel, or nascent...
What if I told you we were capable of more than just trying to educate our local neighborhood racists?

And What if Black History Month covered more than just the basics?
Re-runs of your favorite male-dominated faces...holding hands singing amazing graces..

There are far too many Hidden Figures in our basements, Like them Sistas at NASA. Face it. Black girl magic ...has always been an understatement!

But while Black resilience is more blatant
Centuries of cultural assimilation leave folk determined to overstate Myths-

We weren't all kings and queens, though it’s fun to reminisce- and push back
There’s no need. We have a rich history and heritage without leaning on problematic hierarchies like these.

Likewise, I’m not sure how useful it is, to be preoccupied with the “exceptionals” on anybody's list---be it tragic sorrows, or accomplished intellectuals.

What we miss, is thee everyday, or quotidian in which we live. Let’s look to the masses for the classics, and avoid being class-ist.
Or simply limiting the avenues for our advancements.

Ya, we have, and continue to surpass they standards-
We got doctors, pilots, inventors, scientists, mathematicians and philosophers.
Rhetoricians, athletes, engineers, writers, and farmers.
And i'm not talking about one or two, more like countless millions... from Obama’s last appointment to African antiquity, Kemet, and Timbuktu-
The Greeks know who they stole from- though they progeny act like they haven’t a clue

Our history goes back before ....the arabs institutionalized .....and europeans internationalized slavery, to get paid

Before Muhammad enslaved, and white Jesus betrayed

Before the Portuguese, French, Spanish and English all began their raids.
Cutting up Africa and spreadin us around the world quicker than the spice trades

Instead, of a month... we need a parade, cultural centers, and . to . stop. getting played!
They invaded more then just our privacy, frightfully,
Ask John Henrik Clarke, even blind he could see ... (with all intended irony) back to the days of African Primacy- like thee Axum, Mali, and Songhai dynasties

Before the Diasporic fracture-  and intra-racial divisions that were manufactured
Between thoses enslaved Africans dropped off in the americas and those dropped off in the caribbean. Well, race and ethnicity... is a little tricky... but, see, we, STILL KIN.

Some picked cotton, for others it was tobacco, shugga cain, or dying indigo!
And then there where some who just said no!
Our perspective, pride, and serenity is informed by how far back we go.

So, I suggest we let go of our fixation with plantation slavery,
the Harlem renaissance, and the 60’s
And I mean quickly!
Drinking from a stagnant Well... will do little more then make us sickly.

Let’s celebrate more than just one segment- perhaps the present,
Learn from the past, and show reverence, but then...
let our brilliance flow swiftly into.... a future that's not tied to torment-
like Katrina, tents that were tardy, and the failures of FEMA

Afro Futurism if you will, creative in it's clean up-
a term you might not be used to, and that’s fine
Shoot, I ain't get put up on Alondra Nelson until I was like 29!
But, Back to this nonlinear timeline.

I remember, I was a 9th grader
When I fell in love with Jada...Pinkett

Or should I say Peaches. You know it's a Lowdown Dirty Shame. She was chasing after Keenan. Then Set it off with Latifa. In Jason's Lyric...she gave Black love new meanin.
even, showed up on a A Different World for a few seasons ....
with Whitley and Dwaaaayne
I know It's random, but “this” too, is Black history...is all I'm sayin

Ahh, and then there was Deja, or Tyra, Banks with Omar Epps in Higher Learning.
Man I own John Singleton many thanks. Had me wanting to read more, run track, go to college, think about race and... well ....marry Tyra Banks----I was a sophomore in high school bout to get expelled another time or two- yet, Laurence Fishburne was so cool, “he had me feeling like...” being a professor was the thing to Do!..

I was in 6th grade--with no clue-- before I realized Jordy, Kunta Kinte, and that brotha from Reading Rainbow were the same person. It’s true. And when I Watched the Wiz I ain't even want Dorothy to go behind that curtain. I'd a told her to mind her biz and leave Richard Pryor alone... stop flirtin.
Get ya dog, click ya heels, and let that man finish workin.

But that's just me. probably...
See, I’m the type of cat that wanted Mr. T to whoop on Rocky.
Don’t let me put on a leather jacket I’d a swore I was Shaft. ...And Richard Roundtree
Sho Nuff, the younger me thought I was real tough, a Bonafide Bruce Lee, Roy
Right or wrong, them Blacksploitation films brought me all kinds of joy
So did, House Party, The Fresh Prince, In Living Color, and Martin- just to name a few
Unfortunately, losing Prince, Left Eye, Aaliyah and Whitney,
had me feeling 50 shades of blue

I mean ill, i.e. the Fugees without Lauryn hill. Netflix and no chill, 6flags with no thrills
A wedding with no frills, or even worse.....a BBQ with no grills

You, really wanna know what's Black history to me.... stuff like:
when, Nas had that beef with Jay Z, Chapelle took off overseas, the first two seasons of Boondocks, anything Morgan Freeman has eva said, and Michael Vick being freed

The list's not for everybody, I concede, maybe just my cup of tea- with that much I agree
But hopefully, my point was received, Our limited conceptions of Black History Month leaves me grieved. Why not let's have fun with it? Wouldn't that be ok? Expanding our perception is key.

I wrote this listenin to Janelle Monae, or was it Stevie, I wonder, Naw, you know I think it was Tony! Toni! Toné! followed by Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield, and Donny Hathaway, Oh! and the Ojays! In that order...Young Jeezy, J Cole, Black Thought, and Lupe Fiasco! Spotify gets it, they just be letting um flow. Lastly, I finished it listening to Lecrae, Bizzle, Trip Lee, and Tedashi- They even have ya favorite Negro spirituals this time of the year if you ain't know! Obviously, and since I'm cool with commercials it ain't even cost me. Paying attention is what's costly

Now, i'm am drop these last few names and go...
Cause they're important to the Black Radical tradition
And, cause, most Februarys they come up missin---But, I promise I'll go slow

So, You've heard of Marcus Garvey getting out of prison
Frantz Fanon, Sidney Poitier, and Miles Davis i'm guessing
Jimi Hendrix, Bobby Seale, Cornel West, and Shawn King
But what about Octavia Butler, Saidiya Hartman, Erica Edwards, and Hazel Carby?
Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, NourbeSe Philip ,and Kara Keeling?

Ohhh...Being Black is a wonderful feeling!
We, stay swingin for the Fences like Denzel and Viola,
so, with each year I get older, I be on my Sankofa!
Looking back and then forward
Meanwhile, Venus & Serena keep getting colder
And might just make you a believer---
In Black excellence, like Usain Bolt, Steph Curry, and Derek Jeter

The list could go on and on and on and on-----like miss Erykah Badu. Rolling around in the mud singing her favorite song

Now, maybe NONE of these Black folk mean anything to you...
or give you a sense that you belong
But someone does? and you do.
A mother, brother, cousin, friend, uncle, or auntie....
Father, teacher, co-worker, or mentor, probably?

And what about you?
Whose life did you impact while being Black, and refusing not to crack
In fact, I got a better question,
Who helped bring you to wholeness and let go of lack? Reject shame, and embrace Blackness...with both your individual and collective identities intact

I can think of a few. But I'll stop here and humbly submit this poem for your review
Put simply, “WE ARE Black History” so let’s not just be mindful of what we've done....
but what we do.

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