

RICE UNIVERSITY

**Underneath the Surface: African American Religion and  
Tattoo Culture**

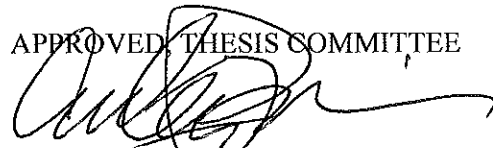
by

**Jason Jeffries**

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE



---

Dr. Anthony B. Pinn, Chair  
Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of  
Humanities and Professor of Religious  
Studies, Director of Graduate Studies



---

Dr. Jeffrey J. Kripal  
J. Newton Rayzor Chair in Philosophy and  
Religious Thought



---

Dr. William B. Parsons  
Professor of Religious Studies



---

Dr. James D. Faubion  
Professor of Anthropology, Varoslav  
Tsanoff Chair in Anthropology

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## ABSTRACT

### **Underneath the Surface: African American Religion and Tattoo Culture**

by

**Jason O. Jeffries**

This dissertation is an exploration of the relationship between religion and tattooing, a form of body modification, within the African American community. I argue that tattooing should be included as source material for the study of black religion, because it is an embodied, cultural product that often captures black experience, black cultural memory, black ethics, black history, black social analysis and identity.

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# Chapter 1

## **Introduction**

This dissertation is an exploration of the relationship between religion and tattooing within for the African American community. I will argue that tattooing should be included as source material for the study of black religion. Tattooing is an embodied, cultural product that often captures black experience, black cultural memory, black ethics, and black history.

From the time we are born, the human body is modified for physical, spiritual, psychological, social, and cultural transformations. Tattooing is an embodied practice that will help explore the role of the body as the site of religion and religious practices. The body is both the site for the inscription of power and the primary site for the resistance to that power, which helps to form self-identity. Those who receive tattoos are literally writing on/in the body.



Several scholars of black religion, including Kelly Brown Douglas, M. Shawn Copeland, and Anthony Pinn have begun to highlight the importance of material bodies in black religion. Although they discuss the material body in terms of suffering and oppression, they seem to pay little attention to the mind. In their descriptions of the body, there is no place for the mind, the automated systems that function within the body, emotion, and feeling. It is also unclear how the material body functions in religious experience. The bodies these scholars describe are discursive or anthropological in nature.

### **1.1.1. Literature Review**

In this section, I will discuss several key texts that take the body as a key component in the formulation of religion or theology. In addition to key texts in religious studies, it is also necessary for me to discuss several texts across various fields that analyze tattooing and tattoo culture.

Scholars of African American religion have given attention to the body by describing the historical terror, dread, violence, and oppression that black and brown bodies have endured in the context of American oppression. However, many of these works focus on what they call the discursive and material body without giving much attention to the inner psychic world. These texts, including works by M. Shawn Copeland, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Anthony Pinn, clearly state their intention to make the body central in their analysis.

In *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, M. Shawn Copeland examines black bodies in hopes of making the legacy of slavery and bodies in pain visible by recounting accounts of torture, sexual assault, and lynching. The physical body is present in her work. She centralizes the black woman's body using theological anthropology to interrogate the impact of the dehumanization of black bodies in history, religion, culture, and society. Copeland grounds her theological anthropology in the following convictions: (1) The body is the site for mediation of divine revelation; (2) the body frames human experience as both relational and social; (3) the creativity of the divine is manifested in the difference in race, sexuality, and gender; (4) solidarity is a set of body practices; and, (5) the Eucharist orders and transforms our material bodies into the body of Christ.

Copeland's understanding of the body is both spiritual and symbolic. She relies on Yves Cattin's and Mary Douglas' theories of embodiment. Cattin understands the body as the site of divine revelation. From Douglas, she gathers that the social body heavily influences the way the physical body is perceived. The social body assigns meaning to the physical body and this assignment influences or determines the quality and direction of human lives.

Copeland described how philosophical and scientific thought during the Enlightenment contributed to the idea that black bodies are inferior to white bodies. However, the role of emotions, feelings, and the unconscious are absent from her analysis because she is mainly concerned with black bodies as they have defined by the pseudoscientific gaze. I agree that the "gaze" is important in study of black

religion, but Copeland does not give a sense of how the black body responds to the gaze. In her analysis, black bodies remain the object of the gaze. However, I am interested in ways in which black bodies move, feel, reason, and respond to gaze that attempts to restrain and restrict them.

Although Copeland argues the body should be privileged in theological discourse, she only speaks about the social body as she develops her theological anthropology. In doing so, she privileges the suffering of black women's bodies and interpreting the suffering of Christ as a model for the human capacity to act in love. She does this through the symbol of the Eucharist, in which the broken body of Christ represents the suffering of all human kind and the sacrifice of Christ is seen as love for all human nature – her proposed solution for Christians. In other words, as Christ, God's son has suffered and loved despite his suffering. This becomes the mode for human beings who suffer. This solution to human suffering does not make evident the ways that black Americans respond with their bodies to the racialized, oppressive environment to which she describes. What she proposed is a new theological framing – a new discourse. The proposed discourse determines what one should believe is about suffering, using Christ's suffering as a measure. Yet, she did not acknowledge how even this suggestion will operate unconsciously. She made no suggestion to how the new discourse would aid African Americans in coping with the continuing oppressive environment in which they live.

Like Copeland, Kelly Brown Douglas is also concerned with bodies and embodiment in her books *What's Faith Got to Do With It?: Black Bodies/Christian*

*Souls and Black Bodies and The Black Church*, and *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. For Douglas, black bodies are socially constructed by discourse and those discourses restrict and restrain the material body.

In *What's Faith God to Do With It?*, Douglas argues that at its roots, Christianity has been coalesced with Platonic ideals, mainly soul/body duality, which enables degradation of the bodies of people who have been “othered,” especially black bodies. In Platonic philosophy, the soul is ultimately important and bodies have no real value. This heretical version of Christianity, in Douglas’ words, has been dominant in evangelical Christianity and prompted the church’s silence in matters of black suffering, including the atrocities of chattel slavery and the sexual abuse of black women during that period and beyond. Douglas claims that African Americans have responded theologically to the problem of Platonized Christianity. First, blacks, filtered their reading of scripture and gave more value to some passages or narratives over others – a scriptural cannon of sorts. Also, African Americans interpret God’s revelation through human history. In this regard, God is black.

In *Black Bodies and the Black Church*, Douglas’ main concern is the exclusion of particular groups of black people who live particular lifestyles from the black church. She argues as long as the black church is not a safe and affirming space for people with “blues bodies,” then its authority within the black community and in the larger society will dissipate and its very black identity will be lost. By blues bodies (bodies moving in the material world), she is speaking about the individuals who

exist on the fringes of life. She refers to these people as the black underclass. Their lives are problematized by white racism and the deprivations of crushing poverty. For Douglas, this means the black woman's body is the archetype of blues body because the black woman's body has been not only the object of racism and economic disparity, but also sexism. It is the black woman's body, according to Douglas, that contains the discursive stereotypes that labeled black people as tawdry, ill-kept, unreliable, lazy, lewd, and lascivious beings. For the church to remain relevant, it must develop a "crossroads theology," a disruptive discourse that works to counter damaging, discursive stereotypes. Crossroads theology works by interrupting harmful narratives and oppositional binaries such as sacred/secular and body/soul. According to Douglas, binaries create divided identities and foster disharmony between and within bodies. To disrupt these binaries, crossroads theology must challenge the dualistic of reality.

In *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, Douglas outlines the social construction of black bodies most clearly. *Stand Your Ground* is Douglas' attempt to explain why whites have gunned down so many black people, including youth. Despite what some may see as an easy case to prosecute, many of the white shooters have subsequently avoided conviction, and in some cases indictment, for killing black people by using "stand your ground" laws as a legal defense.

Douglas traces the roots of American stand your ground laws to the myth of Tacitus's *Germania*, a book identifies Germanic tribes who fended off the Roman empire in the first century as aboriginal people who were free from all taint of

miscegenation. They were an unmixed race of people, distinct and unique.

Germania, described these people as having “fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames.”

The ideas in this book became part of the religious myth of Anglo Saxon American exceptionalism, the construction of whiteness/white supremacy, and the idea of cherished property.

The Anglo-Saxon myth of exceptionalism is the ideological grounding for ideas that hold black bodies inferior. It is the central conception of the black body, that grounds all other negative, harmful depictions of black bodies, including black bodies as criminal, hypersexual, and chattel. Chattel means that black people did not have the rights to possess their own bodies, other black bodies, or the bodies of their own children. In contrast to cherished white bodies, which are protected at all costs and never commodified, black bodies could only hope to be valued property of whites.

Douglas argues that the hypersexualized black body and the criminal black body have roots in the idea of chattel and slavery. Hypersexuality, according to Douglas, was constructed to support the sexual abuse of enslaved Africans. According to the black hypersexual body, both black men and women naturally contain an insatiable sexual appetite. In contrast, white bodies, according to the myth of Anglo Saxon exceptionalism, are ruled by virtue and reason. Because part of the value of black bodies as a commodity depended when “it” could produce other laboring bodies, black men and women were forced to breed with one another. This reasoning also worked to hide the guilt of whites that raped black women. Because

of the society's belief of hypersexuality, white men could not be guilty of raping black women because black women were thought to be sexual temptresses. Black men, in contrast, were seen to be sexual predators and they were always considered guilty of rape when they encountered (or even stared at) a white woman.

Douglas furthers her argument to discuss the idea of the dangerous black body. Because black bodies are seen as chattel and meant to be property of whites, any free black body is deemed dangerous because it threatens the established social order of Anglo Saxon exceptionalism. Simply by entering white space, the black body challenges the idea of white supremacy. This is because, according to the myth, freedom is a right and property of whiteness and thus, if a black body possesses freedom, it possessed something that it does not have a right to – something that belongs to whites. Because of the inherent danger to whites, black bodies must be restricted, corralled, and restrained, keeping them from coming in contact with white cherished bodies. In order to show how the freedom of black physical bodies have been restrained, Douglas, traces several laws and traditions, including black codes, vagrancy laws, lynching, redlining and other housing policies during the New Deal, which were designed to segregate black bodies and white bodies.

In regards to the material body, both Copeland and Douglas shed light on the suffering of African Americans, especially the suffering of black women. However, both of them fail to show the role of the unconscious and emotions in the material body. Because of this, there is no attention to the manner in which religious rituals

and cultural production have their roots in the emotions, feelings, and experience in the material body. Because of this, their analysis is limited to understanding the collective meanings of the defense of traditional forms of religion instead of the individual and sometimes variant interpretations of those traditional religions.

Like both Copeland and Douglas, Anthony Pinn has been concerned with bodies and embodiment. In his book, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion*, Dr. Anthony B. Pinn argues that black religion, which consists of a liberation norm and an underlying impulse, developed as a response to the dehumanizing terror and dread that blacks experienced in the Middle Passage, slavery, slave auctions, and hanging rituals. This response endured from the beginning of the slave trade to the end of the Civil Rights movement and liberates African Americans by seeking to help blacks establish themselves as agents of their own will and their own bodies. Pinn argues, that regardless of the religious tradition, black religions in America, especially the black church and the Nation of Islam, share a common nature and meaning. Their doctrines, rituals, and ceremonies all help the dehumanized African America begin to find a sense of what he calls “complex subjectivity,” a healthy view of the self that allows one to take hold of their own agency.

During the Middle Passage, Europeans perfected the structures supporting slavery. The perfection of slavery was made possible by the industrial, capitalistic revolution in Europe. Europeans viewed black people as different based on skin color and culture. Physical difference was arranged in a hierarchical order with



preference for the characteristics of white Europeans as the model for ideal humanity. Because of the physical differences of black people, Europeans began to believe that African Americans had diminished abilities in intelligence. These assumed differences were supported by pseudo sciences. In this period, Europeans defined blacks, taking away their agency and beginning the dehumanization process. Because of the dehumanization of blacks in the Middle Passage and slavery, black became objects, or commodities in the eyes of the Europeans, instead of human beings.

This dehumanization was reinforced by what Pinn calls rituals of reference; especially slave auctions and hanging rituals. During legal slavery in the United States, slave auctions served as the venue where black bodies were traded in exchange for something of value. Auctions reinforced the black person's feeling of nonbeing because they were treated as a commodity. It was at the auction that the end goal of the Middle Passage was carried out. Black bodies were sold for use in carrying the burden for someone else's labor for profit or for luxury. After the end of legal slavery, black people still had not achieved full human identity. They maintained remnants of an identity, but they still did not enjoy the rights of full agency. White citizens used violent rituals and black codes in order to enforce the feelings of diminished humanity on the African Americans. Hanging was used in instances when the black people "got out of their place," whether it was being more successful than whites in business or challenging the status quo. Often during hanging rituals, blacks were dismembered and parts of their bodies were kept as mementos and symbols of white power.

Pinn argues that it is out of this dreadful context that black religion emerges as a response to efforts to dehumanize. However, the terror from the experiences of black people should not be regarded as a positive cause for the development of black religion. This dread should be understood as a historical reality that had to be fought. Religion is the historical way that black people fought this terror. In other words, black religion attempts to fracture history in an effort to restore human freedom to black people.

Further, Pinn argues that an underlying impulse for complex subjectivity is at the center of black religion. This is an urge to find ultimate meaning for one's self. Pinn looks at religious conversion, particularly stories of slave conversion in order to point out the search for meaning. Pinn believes that conversion function as a way that dehumanized blacks can confront the realities of historical identity, wrestle with the old consciousness, and embrace a new consciousness, new behaviors, and identify with a community that has a similar self view and consciousness.

In his book, *Embodiment and the New Shape of Theology*, he is concerned with the manner in which the body is important to the development of theology and religion by centralizing the body in both. He seeks to construct a more sustained theology utilizing the body as its primary source material. In the first section of the book, Pinn reviewed the ways in which scholars of black religion account for discursive bodies in their thought and theology. They have focused on issues of racial, gendered, and classed discourses, but have not given adequate attention to lived, material and embodied experience.

In what follows, Pinn wrestles with theological language and categories, redefining them based on lived, bodily religious experience. In the fifth chapter of the book, Pinn turns to African American music, mainly blues and hip hop, to present a theological framework that makes the body central- effectively challenging the Christian theological norms by redefining concepts like “demonic” as “forces of restriction and domination” which “seek to penetrate bodies according to schemes not always known in clear and fixed way.” In the sixth chapter, Pinn redefines redemption as “outcomes of self-care that involve comfortable modalities of identity either consistent with or in opposition to the strategies of normalization.” Conversion is closely connected with redemption. Through the analysis of the lived, embodied experiences of hip hop artists such as Tupac Shakur, Pinn argues that conversion does not require a shift in the way one moves through the world, one’s ethical behavior. However, it does require a more embodied sensitivity to one’s own presence in the world. It is a deeper appreciation for one’s own self-identity, value, and worth in the world. For Pinn, Tupac challenged prevailing discourse and norms by presenting his body through religious troupes (e.g., Black Jesus and/or T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E.), and by shifting the ethical grounds from Christian doctrine to “authenticity” or “realness.” Pinn suggests a shift toward religious aesthetics, which he defines as the look and workings of the body, including forms of body modification.

Next, I will review books that deal with tattooing and its religious and social elements. These books discuss the protest qualities of tattooing. These books discuss tattooing as a ritual that creates meaning, functions as an act of protest

against society, creates identity, marks significant moments in one's life, and signifies membership in communities while using words, signs and symbols to accomplish this.

In the book, *Body Style*, Theresa Winge argues that when displayed, the subcultural body is a visual celebration of the body; its modifications and supplements; its movements and performances; and its explorations and rituals. By subculture, the author is referring to a group smaller in population than mainstream culture as a whole, and who consciously set themselves apart from the mainstream society through their dress, ideology, music, language, technology, geography, and/or activities. The subcultural body style encompasses more than just the physical body of a subculture member (dress, adornment, exterior, presentation, etc.). She extends the ways the subcultural body is presented, displayed, disguised, and celebrated inside and outside the subculture.

Another scholar who discusses tattooing and identity is Margo DeMello. In *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo*. She discusses the path to which tattooing has become accepted among middle-class whites in the United States. Because of the acceptance of tattooing among the white middle class people, the perception of tattooing has shifted and accepted as a symbol of middle class status and a quasi-religious practice.

Later, DeMello argues that tattooing was adopted by middle-class whites as a spiritual or quasi-religious practice due to several social movements, including the self-help, New Age, women's spirituality, men's movements, and ecology

movements. These movements became popular during the seventies and eighties. During this period, many in the United States began to turn inward and much of the social activism of the earlier period shifted toward an emphasis on personal transformation. According to many observers, this was a moment of profound importance. It was a revolution of human consciousness that affected how people thought about relationships, religion, work, education, and the self. Tattooing, for the first time, was associated with self-help spirituality such self-actualization, social and personal transformation, ecological awareness, and spiritual growth.

While both Winge and DeMello provide insight on the historical, religious, and social aspects of tattooing, they limit their discussion to the use of tattooing by the predominately white working and middle classes. The history that they provide excludes African Americans. I suspect that this exclusion is partially because the popularity of African Americans wearing tattoos began around the late 1980s or early 1990s. Regardless of this possibility, neither author made reference to African Americans when they discuss subculture or Modern Primitives. This is interesting since African American communities could easily be classified subcultural because they have been largely deemed inferior and have been excluded from American society through slavery, black codes, segregation, racism, and oppression.

### **1.1.2. Chapter Overview**

In the chapter two of this dissertation, I use sociology and systems theory to understand the ways in which power relationships work to confine black bodies understand systems of oppression. Through these relationships, black bodies are

geo-spatially restricted and prevented from fully participating in the social, political, and economic life of American society. As a result, African Americans turn to cultural production to express the highs and lows of living a life constricted by these parameters. Cultural production serves as a way in which black bodies regain subjectivity.

In chapter three, I discuss the psychological effects of living under systems of oppression under what I call the white gaze. I argue that the white gaze views black bodies through distorted vision. African Americans attempt to prevent seeing themselves through these lenses, but sometimes internalize the opinions and ideals of the white gaze. As a result, they may suffer some forms of body dysmorphia and other forms of psychic distress. I suggest that body modification, especially tattooing, is a method by which those who suffer under the psychological can restore a healthy sense of self.

In chapter four, I provide analysis of the data I collected through ethnographic research. During this research, I questioned both tattoo artists and people who have tattoos about their opinions on the relationship between tattooing and religion. I will discuss the relationship between religion and tattooing. My questions included the role of the tattoo artist in the practice of tattooing, the symbols utilized in tattoos, the tattoo shop as sacred space, the significance of the tattoo for the tattooed person, and tattoo stories (the way that tattooed persons describe the significance of their tattoos). I argue that tattooing in the African American community provides material that is valuable for analyzing religion. That

is, through the reading of tattoos and understanding tattoo narratives, we may better understand a person's morals, ethics, and values. We also can better understand how they utilize their tattoos to express what is meaningful in their lives.

In chapter five, I analyze Tupac Shakur's "Exodus" tattoo as a case study to examine how tattoos may be utilized as source materials for religious studies. I will examine scholars of black religious thought who have analyzed Tupac's tattoos, such as Michael Eric Dyson, and Linda Tucker, and provide a re-reading of these tattoos that will point to the significance of including tattooing as a source for African American religious studies. I will argue that Tupac's tattoos are a way in which Tupac practiced and expressed his religious in the context of oppression. Tattooing, for Tupac, was a quest for complex subjectivity, a way for him to creating meaning in life.

## Chapter 2

# Black Cultural Con(strain)

The way black bodies position and posture themselves has become part of a national discussion in social and press media due to the professional football protest over police brutality, which has contributed to the killing of a significant number unarmed black women and men in the United States. Colin Kaepernick, who sparked the protests, originally decided to sit during the national anthem and presentation of the flag of the United States in order to bring awareness to the fleeting justice for the families of unarmed shooting victims by the hands of police officers. Kaepernick wanted to continue to sit during the national anthem as a symbolic gesture that he was standing with the oppressed. Since his initial protest, Kaepernick, shifted from sitting to kneeling on one knee during the presentation of the flag and the performance of the anthem. This was a compromise, an attempt to appease those who felt that his protest was offensive to military veterans, many who have made the ultimate sacrifice and given their lives in the name of the



American ideals of freedom and liberty through war. Many believe that Kaepernick ultimately sacrificed his professional football career because of his protest. Despite his absence from professional football, other professional football players have joined in with protests and continued to kneel on one knee during the playing of the national anthem during the preceding season. The issue continues to be debated, weekly. The protests have even received attention from the president of the United States, Donald Trump, who has challenged National Football League team owners to fire any player who refused to stand during the national anthem.

The national anthem protests highlight the way in which black bodies are monitored by the dominant society. Regardless of the larger pressing issues about justice for black killing victims, which Kaepernick claims that his protest represented, the sticking point has been whether or not his chosen form of protest (body positioning) during a ritual of civil religion is respectful to the ideals of the country. The ideals of freedom and liberty “allow” him to be a professional athlete and enjoy the wealth and popularity that comes along with those “privileges.” Literally, the position of his black, tattooed body is under perpetual surveillance and constant judgment by an entity outside of his body, the white gaze. The controversy caused by the protests had real life consequences for him physically, economically, and politically. Because he has been, arguably, black balled from playing professional football, it has real impact on his life and lifestyle. The posturing of his body has been, in some ways, a professional suicide. Why is it that his black body is so important and has caused so much contestation in the wealthiest and most prosperous nation on the planet?

The Kaepernick protest gives us insight into a larger issue that occurring with black bodies in the United States. The movement of black bodies is always being watched and surveiled by the white gaze. The very movement and posture of black bodies may be seen as offensive and threatening to white life and white ideals. This “threat,” is often met with resistance, punishment, and death by the hands of white supremacy. The fact that the president of the United States, arguably the most powerful person in the world, is concerned with the movement and positioning of black, individual, bodies during the playing of the national anthem at a football game speaks to the way in which body bodies are a concern for white sovereignty and white supremacy. I am certain that within the crowd of a football game there are many varying responses and postures taken during the national anthem, including people from various ethnic backgrounds, sitting, standing, singing, and placing their hands over their hearts, drinking beer, and purchasing popcorn and hotdogs. None of these various postures have garnered the same national or sovereign attention. In this chapter, I will begin to discuss the systematic way that the white gaze places black bodies in the condition of (con)strain by limiting how they are defined and how they move through time and space. I will argue that scholars of religion should turn to tattooing in the continued tradition of using black culture in understanding religion and developing black religious thought. As a form of black culture, tattooing, as adopted and utilized by African Americans, speaks regaining or taking control of the black body. One may debate the significance of this act, however, it is an act that creates meaning for the individual and, therefore, is valuable material for religious studies. (Con)strain, then, describes both the physical and psychological

experience of African American's within the environment of white oppression.

Under the weight of oppression, black culture helps black people express the religious beliefs, ethical beliefs, rituals, and practices (theistic and non-theistic) that they utilize in order to navigate through a hostile world and express subjectivity. I define (con)strain as the physical and psychological restriction of black bodies in the United States. By black bodies, I mean both (a) the discursive or social body – the ideas, myths, language, and knowledge that is attached to material bodies; and (b) the material body - a biochemical reality that occupies space and time and remains engaged with its environment, constantly. The body includes the materials that make up the physical body such as skin, bones, and fluids. It also is made up of internal and external organs, the mind, and several systems that operate unconsciously which stating in constant engagement with the environment such as the respiratory system (you do not have to consciously tell yourself to breath each breath).

(Con)strain is the primary condition that black bodies have experienced in the Unites States under the regime of white supremacy. There are two aspects to the condition of (con)strain, constraint and strain. Constraint is a reference to the way in which black material bodies, have been corralled to particular geo-spatial locations, restricted or regulated from entering white space freely, and excluded from participating in the political, economic, and social life of the country. Because black bodies are in constraint, black culture is one of the most prominent options African Americans have to express their emotions and feelings – it is one of the ways

in which they are able to contemplate, debate, and create life meaning, and become subjects in the context of oppression.

### **2.1.1. The White Gaze**

The white gaze is representative of the collective consciousness of white supremacy. It is both the source for ideas of about standards of beauty and the location of power that is forced upon black bodies. For us to understand how the white gaze places black bodies in constraint, the physical and geo-spatial aspect of (con)strain, we must discuss how the white gaze is the collective consciousness of white society and the disciplining power of white supremacy.

Emile Durkheim, in *Division of Labor*, explained how laws, within a society, relates to the idea of collective consciousness. By collective consciousness, Durkheim means the beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society diffused over society as a whole.<sup>1</sup> I argue that the average member of American society is the white, heterosexual male because white men remain the most politically, socially, and economically dominate group in the nation. In other words, they continue to maintain the most power within the social system in the United States. Therefore, black people, men and women, have been excluded from being average members of American society.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Calhoun, Joseph Gerteis, and James Moody, *Classical Sociological Theory* (John Wiley & Sons, 2012), 159.

Some characteristics of the collective consciousness are: a) the sentiments remain consistent throughout a particular society regardless of geographic location; b) it links successive generations, passing ideals from generation to generation historically; c) it is not the sum total of individual consciousness, meaning that it is more than the sum of its parts; and d) it exists in a psychological type of society.<sup>2</sup>

For Durkheim, the level of intensity of the collective consciousness within a society may leave room for individuals to act freely. The more liberty that society leaves for individuals to maneuver without the sanctions of the collective consciousness, the more individuals are free to specialize in particular functions because of dependent, inter-social relationships within society. These relationships are practiced repeatedly, due to the stable nature of the society. They become custom, or habit. The laws of the society ultimately embody the social cohesion expressed in collective conscious. Laws, then, give the collective consciousness stability and allow it to order the behaviors and relationships of social actors within the society. In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, the collective consciousness is embodied in emblems or symbols adopted by communities. Durkheim states that the emblem is an obvious rallying point for any group because collective feelings can become self-conscious only by being attached to a material object. For Durkheim, the collective consciousness is coded in symbols, totems, or emblems. These symbols, regardless whether they are ritualized theistically or not, point to society itself. Collective consciousness represents the wishes of society as a whole, whether embodied in law

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<sup>2</sup> Calhoun, Gerteis, and Moody, 162.

or in symbol. Because laws are the ideals of a society's collective consciousness, we may say that an act of individual people or groups is criminal, despite its moral value, whether it is right or wrong. All that is required for acts to be deemed criminal is that it offends the collective ideals of the average, normal citizens of a society. As we will discuss later, black bodies, in the context of the United States, are often seen as criminal and invoke white fear, even when there is no apparent real threat. The white gaze is a symbol of the collective ideals that whites have determined and ascribed to black bodies.

Collective ideas would simply be opinions if they were absent of power.<sup>3</sup>

Michel Foucault, in several of his works including *Discipline and Punish*, and *Madness and Civilization*, discusses the role of power in societies and how it functions in various ways to confine, control and discipline bodies, essentially making them docile. The white gaze, as I have described, functions as a form of sovereign power, mainly because it retains the characteristic privilege of determining life and death.<sup>4</sup> Sovereign power was usually reserved for a monarch, the absolute source of justice within his or her kingdom.<sup>5</sup> According to Foucault, although societies have changed and monarchs have become less common, sovereign power continues to exist, however, it has changed form.

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<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 11.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 258.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 80.

Sovereign power is no longer held in the sole hands of the monarch, but it is distributed through a web of power and appears more as the right to “let live” instead of the right to kill. In other words, in the classical age, sovereign power appears as the right of the monarch to allow his or her subjects to live by the distribution of the goods, and services provided by the taxes that are levied against the subjects, children, and/or slaves.<sup>6</sup> “Sovereign power, in this regard, is the “right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself; it culminated in the privilege to seize hold of life in order to suppress it.”<sup>7</sup> The judicial form of sovereign power is exercised through the removal or taking away of one’s rights, privileges, goods, or property by the judicial system, which functions as the arm of the “monarch.”<sup>8</sup> It is judicial, judging not only one’s actions, but also one’s intent – one’s soul.<sup>9</sup>

In the modern age, sovereign power in the form of the judicial exercising the right to let live is no longer the main mechanism of power, however it remains present. Sovereign power has taken on a new, multifaceted form that works to control, monitor, optimize, and organize the social. As Foucault argues, “The sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 259.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 16–22.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 259.

The technologies of modern power , which work to make the body docile and discipline them, function on two registers, the anatomico-metaphysical register and the techno-political register. The anatomico-metaphysical register is the knowledge, or discourse that is produced by philosophers, medical fields, and human sciences. Institutions such as schools, and hospitals, which control and correct the operations and/or the behaviors of the body, mark the techno-political register. These registers work to make the body, both useful and intelligible.<sup>11</sup> Docility allows the body to become manipulated, subjected, used, and changed.<sup>12</sup> According to Foucault, the body is caught up in a system of constraints, obligations, and prohibitions. In other words, the body is caught up in a web of complicated power relationships that entangle and confine it.<sup>13</sup>

Although it is certainly no new occurrence that body is the object of power, Foucault argues that power is no longer applied directly to bodies. Three techniques of power significant for the purposes our discussion of the white gaze are: 1) power treats bodies individually, not collectively; 2) power exercises subtle coercions on bodies on the level of mechanism, attempting to control its movements, gestures, attitudes, and speed; and 3) power is continuously applied to

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 136.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 180.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 180.



bodies, uninterrupted, always supervising the processes of bodily activity with special concern for how bodies move through time and space.<sup>14</sup>

The application of disciplinary power has four requirements. First, it sometimes requires an enclosure, a heterogeneous space, a society or group that includes individuals of differing ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, classes, sexes, or ages. Second, the heterogeneous space must provide individuals or groups with partitions, their own private space. Private space enables discipline to locate individuals — to surveil them, to assess their intent and their merits, and to judge their intentions – their souls. Third, discipline requires functional sites that are used to supervise, to wall off communication, and to create useful space. Last, discipline needs to access and rank value. It needs to arrange individuals into different types of classifications. These classifications are not fixed and are used to arrange individuals within a network of power relationships.<sup>15</sup> There are three instruments that heavily determines the success of disciplinary power: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination.<sup>16</sup>

Hierarchical observation is the mechanism that disciplinary power utilizes in order to coerce. This apparatus makes the object of power visible. Foucault argues that hierarchical observation was developed in line with scientific observatories and with changes in architecture. The goal was to observe a large group of subjects with

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 141–46.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 170.

one set of eyes.<sup>17</sup> A central point is established so that everything can be seen and be known is known is revealed.<sup>18</sup> So, for example, a hospital is arranged in a manner that allows for a centralized nursing station to observe a large number of patients in close proximity of one another. This arrangement, ideally, allows for a few people to calibrate the treatment of those who are ill. In this regard, the arrangement of the patients allows for medical observation and the hospital functions a tool for the medical field. Observation, according to Foucault, is not the function of individuals, although each individual participates in the activity. It is a network of relations from the lowest to the highest in a hierarchy. Observation remains largely invisible because the surveillance power is distributed throughout the entire network.<sup>19</sup>

The second instrument of disciplinary power, normalizing judgment, may be defined as a small penal mechanism that enjoys a sort of judicial privilege and has its own laws,. It determines what is considered offensive, and establishes its own forms of justice. Its focus is bodily behavior usually unnoticed or ignored by major penal systems.<sup>20</sup> Offensive behavior is met by punishment, a form of repercussion that makes the offender sense the offense they have committed. This may include humiliation, removal, confusion, being treated indifferently, being ignored, etc. <sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, 190.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 192–93.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 194.

Every disciplinary mechanism has normalizing judgment at its core.<sup>22</sup> The most important element about normalizing judgment for our purposes, is that it compares the actions and behaviors of individuals to the whole – the idealistic whole – differentiating individuals from one another based on their ability or willingness to live up to the rule. When measured, individuals are judged in terms “ability” or “nature.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, those who do follow the normalized standard are seen as inherently inferior or immoral.

The third instrument of disciplinary power, according to Foucault, is examination. Examination is highly ritualized and combines the techniques of hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment, placing the individual under the regime of power. According to Foucault, it makes it possible for individuals to become visible and be judged. Examination makes visibility and judgment possible because it evaluates individuals and “writes” on/about them. The individual is the person who sticks out from the norm – the person or group of people whose bodies do not behave, appear, or conform to the norm. Because these individuals are different from the normalized group, they are criticized and punished. A child in a classroom, for example, who consistently does not listen in class and has a difficult time sitting in his or her desk for long periods of time may be referred to a medical professional who examines and diagnoses (writes on/about) the student. The diagnosis may introduce a medical condition to explain why he or she may be non-

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 193.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 195.

conformant to the behavioral norms. An important element of the ritualized process of examination is documentation. Through documentation, the individual is marked. Foucault explains:

The examination as the fixing, at once ritual and 'scientific,' of individual differences, as the pinning down of each individual in his own particularity (in contrast to the ceremony in which status, birth, privilege, function are manifested with all spectacle of their marks), clearly indicates the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by this status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the 'marks' that characterized him and make him a 'case.'<sup>24</sup>

During examination, the body is described and documented for its ability and character and measured against norms.

If the white gaze, as I have argued, is the collective consciousness of white supremacy and its tool of disciplinary power, then by defining and analyzing the white gaze, we should be able to understand the ways white society views black bodies and controls them through its myths, laws, and traditions. In order to do so, I turn to philosophers, George Yancy and Cornel West. George Yancy describes the "white gaze" as "the performance of distortional 'seeing' that evolves out of and is inextricably linked to various raced and racist myths, white discursive practices, and

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<sup>24</sup> Foucault, *Discipline & Punish*, 192.

centripetal processes of white systemic power and white solipsism.”<sup>25</sup> In the context of the United States, white supremacy allows for whites to access the privilege and the power to be gazers.<sup>26</sup> According to Yancy, the white gaze is also a form of nation building in the sense that it fosters a sense of white bonding, whether spoken or unspoken.<sup>27</sup> It uses its power to map racialized discourse onto black bodies.<sup>28</sup> The negative social discourses about black bodies have been idealized in the form of stereotypes and supported by discourses in the natural sciences, human sciences, and humanities are presented as “truth.”<sup>29</sup>

These discourses are part of a long history of how language has been used to judge black bodies on the basis of their ability and their nature. The misjudgment of black bodies leads to the over-determination, control, killing, dismemberment, and other violent acts toward black bodies. Because of the desire to protect white space from these “dangers,” the enforcement of these ideals restrict the social freedom of African American bodies and their ability to move through time and space freely, by

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<sup>25</sup> George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), xviii.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> For more discussion on oppressive discourses and a historical overview of the role that the sciences and humanities played in supporting oppression, especially racism, see: Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), chap. 2.

<sup>28</sup> For more discussion on oppressive discourses and a historical overview of the role that the sciences and humanities played in supporting oppression, especially racism, see: Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> For more discussion on oppressive discourses and a historical overview of the role that the sciences and humanities played in supporting oppression, especially racism, see: Ibid.

subjecting them to various forms of oppression. This gaze, along with white discursive practices, and racialized myths have defined and judged black bodies as chattel, criminal, demonic, animalistic, hyper-sexualized, and sub-human. These myths, and other forms of racialized discourse, represent white collective ideas about black bodies.

Similar to Yancy's "white gaze," Cornel West's "normative gaze" helps us understand the way the white supremacy functions through the primary sense of sight. However, West goes further than Yancy by explaining how modernity, mainly through the sciences has worked to cement classical Greek ideas of beauty as the standard by which to measure the value and utility of black bodies within society. The human sciences give the discourse a sort of legitimacy in modern times that extends beyond myth and fairy tales – the products of imagination. West's version of the gaze demonstrates how ideals of white supremacy are merged with human sciences and how they exclude non-white bodies from full participation in social, economic, and political participation within society.

West defines the normative gaze as the ideal used to order and compare observations drawn from classical aesthetic values of beauty, symmetry and proportion of the human body, cultural standards of self-discipline, behavioral extremes, and acceptance into the society.<sup>30</sup> West points to the recovery of the classical, Greek ideas of beauty and culture as seminal in the development of white

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 54.

supremacy because those ideas were promoted by influential enlightenment writers, artists, and scholars such as J. J. Winckelmann, Winthrop Jordan and Thomas Gossett.<sup>31</sup> Acknowledging that there were derogatory ideals of non-white bodies before the advent of modernity, West argues that these thinkers were important because they grounded and legitimized their racialized ideals in the institution of science during modernity, when the Catholic church's authority was being challenged by the non-religious.<sup>32</sup>

Part of the institution of science is the field of study, natural history. According to West, the aim and purpose of natural history is "observe, compare, measure, and order animals and human bodies (or classes of animals and human bodies) based on visible, especially physical, characteristics."<sup>33</sup> Once these characteristics are determined through observation, values are placed on the observations and bodies (animal and human) are arranged in hierarchical categories. As a result of the taxonomic arrangement of animal and human bodies based on classical Greek standards, natural history became the basis for white supremacy and race (in this case, skin color) became an authoritative means of classifying humankind by 1735 when Carolus Linnaeus wrote *Natural System*. In

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 55.

the book, Linnaeus classified all of humankind into four racial categories, *Homo Europaeus*, *Homo Asiaticus*, *Homo Afer*, and *Homo Americanus*.<sup>34</sup>

Based on the classical Greek ideals of beauty, white supremacy was further grounded with the development of phrenology and physiognomy, the reading of skulls and faces, respectively. Although these two fields of study are widely accepted as pseudo-science today, West argues that their significance lies in their wide acceptance as legitimate science during their peak and their promotion of European beauty and cultural values.<sup>35</sup> For example, Pieter Camper, a Dutch anatomist, claimed that the ideal facial angle of 100 degrees, which was a characteristic of ancient Greeks, was the standard of beauty. In addition, he argued that a beautiful face was inseparable from “a beautiful, body, beautiful nature, beautiful character, and a beautiful soul.”<sup>36</sup> In contrast, European faces measured 97 degrees, which black people’s faces measured 70 degrees.<sup>37</sup>

According to West, the European values of beauty and culture measured in the pseudo-sciences were visually articulated in art. The father of physiognomy, Johann Kaspar Lavater, argued that painting gave birth to the discipline and served as its language. Lavater also held the features and characteristics of Greek statues as the standards of beauty.<sup>38</sup> With the acceptance of classical Greek ideals as the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 55–56.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



standards for beauty and culture, the normative gaze views variations from the standard as degenerative. The physical appearance and the culture of a white man is an indication of superiority and the hallmark of civilization.<sup>39</sup> As a result, West argues that black bodies are the non-discursive means of production and also rejected because the standards of African American beauty and culture are judged inferior to Greek culture.<sup>40</sup>

### **2.1.2. The White Gaze, Black Bodies, and Distorted Vision**

George Yancy's white gaze and Cornel West's normalizing gaze, helps us describe how the white gaze functions as the collective ideal and the disciplining power of white supremacy, but it is not enough to understand how they function. We must also understand what appears through its distorted vision when it stares at black bodies. When the white gaze looks upon black bodies, it sees something that is animalistic, something akin to the wild in nature — something that seeks raw pleasure, something untamed, and something with superhuman or animalistic strength. This judgment often amounts to a shift from judging, not only the body, but also judging one's intent, one's soul, as argued earlier. Black bodies, as a result of their "animal" nature, are often interpreted as something threatening to white bodies and to white existence. The unbridled black body takes on many forms, but the perceived danger to white bodies remains constant through the view of the

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 65.

muddy white gaze. Anchored in the traditions of white supremacy and slavocracy, there are several stereotypes and explosive images that are prominent in American society that cultivates an environment of fear, resulting in the unjust treatment of black people. The most obvious constructive critique begins with the stereotypes of the black male as the brute, the monkey, the violent criminal, the sexual deviant, the super jock, and the shuffling comic. Even worse, each of these images of the black male is based on the premise that the man of color cannot cogitate, speculate nor meditate deeply on abstract ideas. Instead, the African American uses his body, his or her “animalistic” instinct, instead of reason. Class and education do not shield the black bodies from these stereotypes. Even the most successful, most educated black people are viewed in light of these stereotypes to some degree.

According to Kelly Brown Douglas, the central conception of the black body that grounds all other negative, harmful depictions of black bodies, including black bodies as criminal and hyper-sexualized, is the black body as chattel. Once again, this speaks to the intent of the black body, a judgment of its soul. Douglas argues that the hyper-sexualized black body and the criminal black body, misjudgments based on perceived ability and nature of black bodies, have roots in the idea of chattel and slavery. Hyper-sexuality, according to Douglas, was constructed to support the sexual abuse of enslaved Africans. According to the black hyper-sexual body, both black men and women naturally contained an insatiable sexual appetite as opposed to white bodies, which were, according to the myth of Anglo Saxon

exceptionalism, ruled by virtue and reason.<sup>41</sup> Because part of the value of black bodies as a commodity depended on “it” producing other laboring bodies, black men and women were forced to breed with one another. This reasoning also worked to hide the guilt of whites that raped black women. Because of the belief of hyper-sexuality, white men could not be guilty of raping black women because women were sexual temptresses. Black men, in contrast, were seen to be sexual predators and they were always considered guilty of rape when they encountered (or even stared at) a white woman.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to hyper-sexualized black bodies, Douglas discussed the dangerous black body stereotype. Because black bodies are seen as chattel and meant to be property of whites, any free black body is deemed dangerous because it threatens the established social order of Anglo Saxon exceptionalism by entering white space and challenging the idea of white supremacy. This is because, according to the myth, freedom is a right and property of whiteness. If a black body possesses freedom, it possessed something that it does not have a right to — something that belongs to whites.

Although Douglas explains the “types” of myths that the white gaze sees when it looks at black bodies, it is necessary to further discuss specific stereotypes that have developed in Americans culture, because they have represent how these

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<sup>41</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2015), 65.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

misjudgments about black bodies have been perpetuated through American media and popular culture, signifying their wide acceptance in the society. The Black brute stereotype explicitly presents the Black male as savage, violent, amazingly strong. The white supremacist social order portrays Black men as beings who do not care about right and wrong. They are characterized as men who are totally out of control, raping and killing for no reason. This specific stereotype arose in the 1870s, after enslaved black people were freed. One of the arguments, that proponents of slavery used, is that Africans, by nature, were violent and blood thirsty. They were uncivilized and lacked the mental capacity to learn to become civilized. Under slavery, enslaved Africans had become domesticated and docile. However, if they were released from slavery, they would revert back to their natural, barbaric ways.<sup>43</sup> As slaves, the stereotype portrayed African Americans as simple-minded and childlike. Once freed, those formerly enslaved were depicted as wild and out of control.<sup>44</sup> Thomas Dichter argues during the first Great Migration of African Americans to northern, urban cities, the myth of black criminality developed and was widely accepted by white citizens. He states:

The discourse of black criminality that ensnares them has two major strains, both of which were recent developments at the turn of the century. On the one hand, this period saw the rise of the widespread idea that African Americans had been retrogressing since the

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<sup>43</sup> George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914*, 1st edition (Middletown, Conn. : Scranton, Pa: Wesleyan, 1987), 53–54.

<sup>44</sup> “The Black Brute Stereotype,” *Abagond*, April 23, 2008, <https://abagond.wordpress.com/2008/04/23/the-black-brute-stereotype/>.

abolition of slavery – especially those who had migrated to the urban North. In particular, the census of 1890 was repeatedly invoked as proof positive that the first generation of blacks born after slavery was sicker, less fertile, and more criminal than their white counterparts. As Khalil Gibran Muhammad has demonstrated, the burgeoning field of racial crime statistics in the 1890s and 1900s sought to give black criminality discourse an authoritative and empirical foundation. On the other hand, emerging alongside this demographically minded fixation on crime statistics was the mythical figure of the ‘black beast rapist,’ widely accepted among whites in the North and South alike as an explanation for the surge of lynching in the 1880s and 1990s. While racialized notions of criminality were by no means new to the United States at the turn of the century, these two particular models of black criminality emerged around 1890 and quickly combined to form a powerful and durable amalgam.<sup>45</sup>

Consistently with Foucault’s mechanisms of disciplinary power, the creation of the black brute was support and legitimized by documentation in the form of census data and crime statistics.

Believing that the black criminal is also sexually deviant collapses into the stereotypical image of the black buck. The so-called black buck represents the black male as person who is a physically big, strong, no-good, violent renegade. Full of explosive anger and in perpetual rampage, the black male who is reduced to an

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas Alan Dichter, “Paul Laurence Dunbar’s *The Sport of the Gods* and the Modern Discourse of Black Criminality,” *The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 4, no. 1 (2016): 65–66.

over-sexed savage in a frenzied state, as a result of lust for white flesh.<sup>46</sup> The stereotype perpetuates the belief that every black male is oversexed and that his ultimate desire is to take a white woman as the object of his desire. Underlying this reasoning is the ideal that the white woman is the idealized symbol of the pride, power and beauty in society.<sup>47</sup> The black buck stereotype was made popular by the movie, *The Birth of a Nation* in its depiction of Lynch, the mulatto character, and Gus.<sup>48</sup> The specific stereotype of the black buck is bolstered in popular culture and through rap videos and hip-hop music.<sup>49</sup> Take for example the picture of LeBron James, professional basketball star, on the cover of *Vogue Magazine* with model, Gisele Bundchen. (See Fig. 1) The photo was criticized for invoking racially insensitive stereotypes about the dangerous black man and compared to a depiction of King Kong.<sup>50</sup> Both the magazine cover and the comparison to King Kong implies that black men desire white women as the objects of their sexual desire and invokes the black brute stereotype.

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<sup>46</sup> Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans, and Sean Nixon, eds., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, 2 edition (Los Angeles : Milton Keynes, United Kingdom: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), 251.

<sup>47</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films, Updated and Expanded 5th Edition*, 5 edition (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 10–11.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Hall, Evans, and Nixon, *Representation*, 251.

<sup>50</sup> “LeBron James’ ‘Vogue’ Cover Called Racially Insensitive,” accessed October 1, 2016, [http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2016-03-24-vogue-controversy\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2016-03-24-vogue-controversy_N.htm).



Fig. 1.

The projection of the Black male as a monkey is not limited to athletes. Twice during his campaign and election as President of the United States, Barack Obama, the nation's first African American president, was compared to a monkey. During the presidential campaign, a man printed tee shirts of Obama as popular cartoon character, "Curious George," eating a banana. (See Fig. 2) The tee shirt sparked much debate about racism. There was talk of a lawsuit from the company that owned the rights of the cartoon character.<sup>51</sup> The second time that President Obama was depicted as a monkey was shortly after his election, when he signed an economic stimulus plan. Sean Delonas, a cartoonist for *New York Post*, portrayed

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<sup>51</sup> Errin Haines, "Obama/Curious George T-Shirt Draws Protests," *The Washington Post*, May 15, 2008, sec. Print Edition, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/05/14/AR2008051403613.html>.

Obama as a monkey who had been recently shot. (See Fig. 3) Supposedly, this political cartoon was a parody of a news event regarding the shooting of a chimpanzee in Connecticut who had been domesticated, but suddenly turned violent, seriously injuring a woman. The cartoon's intention was to mock Obama's efforts to revive the economy and to highlight the president's lack of intelligence in executive decision-making.<sup>52</sup>



Fig. 2

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<sup>52</sup> Nicholas Carlson, "What Was Post Thinking Running Obama Monkey Cartoon?," *Business Insider*, accessed August 26, 2016, <http://www.businessinsider.com/what-was-post-thinking-running-obama-monkey-cartoon-2009-2>.





Fig. 3

The black male's deterministic impulse to be a shuffling comic, also called the coon, is described as "the eye-popping pickanninies, the slapstick entertainers, the spinners of tall tales...those unreliable, crazy, lazy subhuman creatures, good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language."<sup>53</sup> There are three variations of the coon stereotype. First, is the pickaninny. Black children in movies usually portray this version of the coon. The pickaninny may be characterized as a "harmless screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting."<sup>54</sup> Some famous pickaninny characters from the movies in the 1920s and 1930s are Sunshine Sammy, Farina,

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<sup>53</sup> Hall, Evans, and Nixon, *Representation*, 251.

<sup>54</sup> Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 5.

stymie, and Buckwheat.<sup>55</sup> The second variation of this stereotype is the pure coon. The pure coon is depicted as an unreliable, lazy, bumbling idiot who is good for nothing except gambling, eating watermelon, and brutalizing the English language.<sup>56</sup> The third variation of the coon is uncle Remus. Remus is closely related to the uncle Tom but he maintains his silly antics. Uncle Remus represents the black man's contentment with an oppressive system and his place in it.<sup>57</sup> Modern examples of this stereotype are prevalent in several films recently produced in Hollywood. One of the most popular Black portrayals of this character is Chris Tucker in his role as "Detective James Carter" in the *Rush Hour* Trilogy.<sup>58</sup> In these movies, Tucker plays a dancing, singing, loud, silly, detective who is successful by chance. Following in the tradition of *Rush Hour*, comedian, Kevin Hart, stars in another movie series, *Ride Along*. The movie depicts a high school security guard, "Ben Barber," (Kevin Hart) who wants to prove to a veteran police officer, "James Payton," (Ice Cube) that he is worthy of marrying Payton's sister. Barber attempts to prove he is worthy of marriage by attempting to become a real police officer. In an attempt to discourage Barber from the police force and from marrying his sister, Payton invites Barber to "ride along" with him during as a guest police officer on a series of staged

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>58</sup> New Line Cinema produced three movies in the *Rush Hour* franchise that starred Chris Tucker and Jackie Chan. These movies were actions movies and perpetuated racial stereotypes for both African American and Asian men.

investigations. Barber clumsily stumbles through the day and contributes to solving an actual crime, by luck.

These stereotypes result in the creation of phantom black bodies. That is, black bodies appear as apparitions where crime is present. This hallucination is the result of the discourses that have been written on black bodies and does not represent the actual bodies themselves. It is also a result of the way in which whites measure their morality based on white moral and ethical ideals, discussed earlier in their chapter. Phantom (a metaphor for ghost) speaks to the apparent invisibility of the humanity of African Americans within the context of the United States. In this way, black bodies are excluded from dominant society, just as phantoms are not part of the living world – as if they do not possess righteous souls. When they do appear within society, they are often unwelcomed and uninvited. Black bodies often invoke fear from the white gaze and oftentimes are met by violent responses.

The white gaze often sees black bodies as it relates to crime and violence even when those bodies are nowhere present and uninvolved in criminal activity. Take for example, Susan Smith, a former student at the University of South Carolina, was convicted of murdering her two sons, 3-year-old Michael and 14 month-old Alexander Tyler Smith. Initially, Smith claimed that she had been carjacked on October 26, 1994, by a Black man and that he drove away with her children still in the vehicle. Nine days later, after an investigation, Smith confessed that she made

up the story. She had, indeed, pushed her car into the lake and watched her children drown.<sup>59</sup> Smith knew that she could blame a black man for killing her children and that she would be believed in the court of public opinion because black men are depicted throughout various media venues as persons with the capacity to kill for no reason, even murdering children. For the period of nine days during the investigation, police authorities spent valuable time and resources in the search for a black criminal who absolutely did not exist. At the same time, many black, male lives were at risk of being mistakenly accused as suspects (and possibly killed) for a heinous crime that Smith, herself, committed. The phantom that Susan Smith described was a product of white mythologized fear of black bodies. As the news report stated:

Susan Smith ran to a nearby home and hysterically knocked on the door. She told the homeowners, Shirley and Rick McCloud, that a black man had taken her car and her two boys. She described how she had stopped at a red light at Monarch Mills, when a man with a gun jumped into her car and told her to drive. She drove around some, and then he told her to stop and get out of the car. At that point he told her he wouldn't hurt the kids and then drove off with the boys who she could hear were crying out for her.

For nine days Susan Smith stuck the story of being abducted. Friends and family surrounded her in support and David had returned to his wife's side as the search for their

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<sup>59</sup> Susan Smith Susan Smith, born September 26, 1971 as Susan Leigh Vaughan, is an American woman sentenced to life in prison for murdering her children. Charles Montaldo, "Susan Smith - Narcissistic Delusions: Rejected Love Fueled the Murder of the Smith Children," About.com, available from [http://crime.about.com/od/murder/a/susan\\_smith\\_2.htm](http://crime.about.com/od/murder/a/susan_smith_2.htm) (accessed April 12, 2009).

children intensified. The national media showed up in Union as the tragic story of the boys abduction circulated. Susan, with her face spotted with tears, and David looking distraught and desperate, made a public plea for the safe return of their sons. In the meantime, Susan's story was beginning to unravel...On November 3, 1994, David and Susan appeared on CBS This Morning and David voiced his full support of Susan and her story about the abduction. After the interview, Susan met with Sheriff Wells for another interrogation. This time however, Wells was direct and told her that he did not believe her story about the carjacking. He explained to her about the light on Monarch Mills staying green and discrepancies in other adaptations she had made to her story during the past nine days.

Exhausted and emotionally badgered, Susan asked Wells to pray with her then afterwards she began crying and telling how ashamed she felt for what she had done. Her confession to pushing the car into the lake began to spill out. She said she had wanted to kill herself and her children, but in the end, she got out of the car and sent her boys to their deaths.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to many cases like Smith's and the phantom black man that kidnapped her children, many encounters of black bodies with law enforcement end up in tragic death of black bodies. Time after time, unarmed black people end up being beat, battered, and killed by police officials in cases where lethal force seems unreasonable. This response to black bodies is in part due to the "white policing syndrome," which has been an attitude of many police officers for at least a

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<sup>60</sup> "Did a Letter Make Susan Smith Kill Her Children?," About.com News & Issues, accessed October 12, 2016, [http://crime.about.com/od/murder/a/susan\\_smith\\_2.htm](http://crime.about.com/od/murder/a/susan_smith_2.htm).

century.<sup>61</sup> The syndrome involves the negative perception of white police officers and their treatment of black communities.<sup>62</sup> White police officers reflect the dominant attitudes of society when they perform their tasks and are likely to hold on to and maintain stereotypes about black people. That is, they operate as a mechanism for sovereign power and discipline. These attitudes are also reflected in racial profiling. According to research, many officers believe that black people, especially males, are more likely to be criminals. Also, black is a physical marker to denote criminality and it is sufficient reasoning to suspect, detain, and search black bodies.<sup>63</sup> This reality, in addition to the use of video technology, has captured more and more moments when police authorities have over-utilized deadly force without consideration of the protection of the civil rights of African Americans. Worse than that, many of the law enforcement officers who commit these acts of murder have seldom faced prosecution. One has to keep in mind that as a police officer, one is functioning as part of the apparatus of disciplinary power. In that capacity, black officers, in many instances, also see black bodies through the vision of the white gaze. As officers of the law, they oftentimes support and reinforce white supremacy, also seeing black bodies as dangerous and criminal, even when they are unarmed and present immediate threat. This distorted vision, as Yancy and West highlight, often results in the misjudgment of black ability, intentions, and

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<sup>61</sup> Kenneth Bolton and Joe Feagin, *Black in Blue: African-American Police Officers and Racism*, 1 edition (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

character of black bodies – a misjudgment of the black soul. As a result, black bodies are met with disciplinary and sovereign restrictions.

I have argued that the white gaze represents the collective ideals of white society and functions as a mechanism of disciplinary power in support of white supremacy. The white gaze sees black bodies through distorted vision, often seeing black bodies as animal-like figures, either useful for the burden of labor like a mule or as something dangerous and powerful like an uncaged, undomesticated predator. In other words, they are seen as bodies without souls. Because of this distorted vision, and the fear that is produced from the perverted beliefs about black bodies, the systems of white supremacy work to contain black bodies geo-spatially, through laws, regulations, and traditions. In the next section, I will discuss the ways in which black bodies are placed under geo-spatial restriction, as a result of the distorted vision of the white gaze.

### **2.1.3. Physical (Con)strain of Black Bodies**

In this section, we will focus on way in which black material bodies, have been corralled to particular geo-spatial locations, restricted or regulated from entering white space freely, and excluded from participating in the political, economic, and social life of the country. I discuss several historical periods in the United States, highlighting the ways in which black bodies have been in the condition of (con)strain. (Con)strain, as I will continue to show, is the primary experience of black bodies and leads to the production of black culture. Before we can relate the physical and psychological experience to tattooing as a source of

cultural production that would be useful for scholars of religion, we must understand the ways in which black bodies have been both physically and psychologically bound by white supremacy. Again, there are two aspects of (con)strain: the physical containment of body bodies, restricting its movement and participation in in economic, social, and political life; and the psychological trauma associated with this restriction. The restriction of black bodies is achieved through the use of disciplinary power produced by the white gaze. Through this historical narrative, we can see all three mechanisms at work, (hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination) making black bodies a cog in the machine of white supremacy, utilizing black bodies for labor and restricting them and excluding them from full participation in white society. The white gaze always observes, judges, and values black bodies in comparison to white ideals of beauty and moral behavior.

The (con)strain of black bodies by white supremacy in America initially proceeded with the Atlantic Slave Trade and the Middle Passage. During the Atlantic Slave Trade, Europeans purchased, captured, and kidnapped more than 10 million black, African people and took them to North and South America, between 1492 and 1867, for the purpose of enslaving them.<sup>64</sup> The bulk of the Africans that were transported to United States (estimated at 550,000) came from the western part of Africa including the nations now known as Sierra Leone, the Gold Coast, and

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<sup>64</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Creating Black Americans: African-American History and Its Meanings, 1619 to the Present*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 30.



Kongo-Angola.<sup>65</sup> The journey to the Americas occurred in three stages: the capture and journey from capture points within the continent to the coast of Africa; the voyage across the ocean from Africa to the Americas; and transportation from the ship to the place of labor and captivity within the Americas.<sup>66</sup> Katie Cannon describes the slave trade as “the most traumatizing mass human migration in modern history.”<sup>67</sup>

During the Atlantic slave trade, Europeans actively hunted Africans, including women and children. Once captured, Europeans chained them and held them in dungeons to await the long journey to the New World.<sup>68</sup> The newly captured Africans lost their physical freedom and were moved and contained at the behest of European slave traders. The journey from the capture point to the coast could take up to several months because many of the captives were forced to walk hundreds of miles from the interior of Africa. Along the trip, Africans could be forced to labor or be purchased and resold several times before they reached the coast. It was also common for Africans to be held for up to three months in pens and involuntarily branded by slavers<sup>69</sup> while waiting for a ship to arrive in order to transport them to

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>67</sup> Katie Geneva Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998), 28.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

the New World.<sup>70</sup> After the Africans were captured, their treatment is evidence that they lost their human status and were treated as moveable property, chattel.

The Middle Passage, the journey from the coast of Africa to the New World, was both physically and psychologically traumatic. The bodies of black people, were stored in the bottom of ships during transportation from the western coast of Africa to the New World. Anthony Pinn argues that during this traumatic process, Africans experienced both an existential and ontological shift, in which they effectively became property instead of people.<sup>71</sup> During this stage of the journey, Africans were chained and stuffed in the bowels of ships that were often too small and poorly ventilated. Enslaved Africans were packed so tightly “their faces pressed against the backs of those lying in front of them.”<sup>72</sup> Because of the overcrowding of ships, ship decks were often covered with feces, urine, vomit, and blood. In addition to being crammed in the bottom of ships, the enslaved Africans were given just enough water and food rations to keep them alive.<sup>73</sup> This environment created a the ripe conditions for the spread of diseases like to dysentery, typhoid, measles, small pox, diarrhea, yellow fever, and malaria. In addition to overcrowding, starvation, and disease, women and young girls had the additional burden of being sexually assaulted by the ship’s crew. The conditions were so rotten that as many as one out

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<sup>70</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 32–33.

<sup>71</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Fortress Press, 2003), 28.

<sup>72</sup> Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 28.

<sup>73</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 33.

of every eight enslaved Africans who began to journey died before they ever reached the New World.<sup>74</sup> Others attempted to end suffering, committing suicide by either refusing to take the meager rations provided to them or by throwing themselves overboard into the deep, blue ocean in order to avoid being beaten by white crew members.<sup>75</sup> This environment was so wretched that Nell Painter suggests that many of the surviving Africans most likely suffered of psychological illness such as depression, shock, and insanity.<sup>76</sup>

During the Middle Passage, black bodies were restricted from freely moving around the ship. Being chained in the bowels of the ship highlight the way in which they were both surveiled and judged by the white gaze. Because they were confined to close quarters in one location, regardless of gender or physical condition (illness and/or disease), it was possible for a small crew to monitor the behavior and actions of black bodies, save those who took advantage of small gaps in the surveillance mechanism to jump overboard to commit suicide in order to escape captivity and mistreatment. In addition, the confinement made it possible for black women to become victims of white, sexual desire. The Middle Passage is an example of how disciplinary power was applied to black bodies in the early stages of the Atlantic Slave Trade.

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<sup>74</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 28.

<sup>75</sup> Eric Robert Taylor, *If We Must Die: Shipboard Insurrections in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade*, 1 edition (LSU Press, 2009), 37.

<sup>76</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 33.

After surviving the Middle Passage, the survivors were subjected to even more (con)strain once they arrived to the New World. African captives, who survived the treacherous journey over the Atlantic Ocean, were then sold at auction into slavery as chattel. The new status, chattel, replaced their identification as human. In light of the white gaze as a tool of disciplinary power, this new identification was “written script” on black bodies. It was a judgment about their value, their ability, and their intention. Their status as chattel meant that black people were precluded from enjoying the rights to possess their own bodies, other black bodies, or the bodies of their own children. They were property of white settlers and entered into a world that further restricted their physical and geo-spatial movement within the Americas. These conditions caused additional traumatic physical and psychological experiences. In contrast, white bodies could never be commodified. In the end, black bodies could only hope to be seen as valued property of whites.<sup>77</sup>

As chattel, black people were forced to live their lives under the institution of slavery in the new land.<sup>78</sup> Slavery restricted them from exploring the reaches of the New World or participating as citizens of the United States like those who came to the New World on their own free will. When slavery was legal in the United States, blacks could neither own property nor enter into contractual agreements with the exception of acting as an agent on behalf of their slave master. Besides, being the

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 53–54.

<sup>78</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 28.

property of white slavers, every aspect of enslaved blacks' lives was controlled by whites including their food, clothing, shelter, and daily activities.<sup>79</sup> Take for example how slave owners often, systematically, provided the enslaved Africans just enough food to perform the labor required on the plantation and survive until the next day of labor. The quality and quantity of food that was given was measured against production and profit margins. The denial of food was often used to reinforce the master-slave relationship.<sup>80</sup> In addition, enslaved Africans were subject to verbal and physical abuse by whites and the constant interrogation where they were located in time and space. For example, if a black person were traveling in town, carrying out an errand for his or her slave master, they would most likely be questioned by a white person and required to show evidence that they were not acting on at their own behest.<sup>81</sup> This restriction on the movement of black bodies was enforced and supported by the law. Whites maintained the right to stop a black person for any reason, especially if they looked "suspicious" or looked like a "criminal."<sup>82</sup> Black bodies lived under perpetual restrictions and could only occupy particular spaces as defined by whites. Their presence in places, such as houses, plantations and the public, were only acceptable while under white supervision.

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<sup>79</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 72.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 72–73.

<sup>81</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 30.

<sup>82</sup> Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over*, 25.

African American encounters with whites outside of these “safe” spaces could lead to death<sup>83</sup>

These laws and unwritten rules restricting the movement of black bodies in the context of slavery are examples of the ways in which hierarchical surveillance and normalizing judgment work to discipline black bodies. Although black people were no longer confined to the holding area of ships, their movement and their actions were always being watched. When they encountered white bodies, their intentions were always judged to be suspicious until they could provide proof that they were acting as a representative of their white masters, not through their own agency. In other words, they were guilty of escaping or causing trouble, unless they were acting on behalf of their slaver. Any white citizen could question any black chattel slave for simply being out of the sight of their slave master.

During slavery, enslaved Africans were forced to use their bodies to perform hard, tumultuous, involuntary labor that benefited whites both economically and socially. Economically, enslaved Africans produced agricultural products, which were then sold by whites in the marketplace. Blacks produced crops that were sold to the North and to Great Britain, including sugar, tobacco, hemp, rice, and cotton.<sup>84</sup> In addition to agriculture, enslaved Africans worked as carpenters, black smiths, cooks, gardeners, weavers, and many other trades that benefited white leisurely

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 84.

lifestyles.<sup>85</sup> With brute force, white slaveholders forced enslaved Africans to work on plantations in various capacities inside the house and in the fields for up to 18 hours per day.<sup>86</sup> Children were not exempt from this labor, and began working in the house and in the plantation fields as early as 7 years of age.<sup>87</sup> Enslaved women, especially, were forced to serve double duty and often worked inside the home, cooking for the plantation mistress and her family, cleaning the slave master's residence, and taking care of the slaveholder's children while being forced to ignore the needs of their own families. This occurred after working long days, ten to twelve hours in the plantation field, depending on the time of year.<sup>88</sup> If death came to an enslaved African under these restricted circumstances by the hands of some other white citizen besides the slave owner, the owner would simply file an insurance claim that would yield them financial benefits similar to the loss of a farm animal.<sup>89</sup>

The disobedience or the inefficiency of black bodies, in regards to labor, was met with normalizing judgment. As discussed earlier in this chapter, each disciplinary system has a small penal mechanism at its center. Plantation workers gave their blood, sweat, and tears under constant surveillance and were coerced to continue to labor under the threat of violence punishment. Unsatisfactory labor production and suspicious behavior was met by painful violence, including

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<sup>85</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 32.

<sup>86</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 86.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>89</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 29.

branding, chaining, whipping, castration, maiming, and/or muzzling. The punishment effectively battered and broke the wills and the bodies of those who were the victims of American slavery,<sup>90</sup> in addition to leaving many of them to live with dismembered bodies.<sup>91</sup>

In addition to the crops that were grown and by black people's unpaid labor, black bodies themselves, because they were considered the property of whites, were often traded on the market in slave auctions. The slave auction, as Anthony Pinn puts it, "...left no doubt that slaves did not own their bodies."<sup>92</sup> During the time when the Atlantic Slave trade was legal in the English, French, and Spanish colonies in the New World, the auction block was first marketplace that distributed black bodies throughout the colonies. Black bodies were prepared for auction regardless of the enslaved African's social or familial ties. Enslaved spouses, mothers, fathers, siblings, and children were sold on the auction block and moved to different plantations, towns, or territories for the financial benefit of white slave holders. After the Atlantic slave trade was outlawed within the colonies in 1808, the slave blocks became even more important to the distribution of black bodies. By 1810, more than 85 percent of the enslaved Africans living in the United States were born on to enslaved parents,<sup>93</sup> many of them were traded at slave auctions. The rapid increase in the population of slaves in the United States, after the end of the Atlantic

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<sup>90</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 85.

<sup>91</sup> Cannon, *Katie's Canon*, 31.

<sup>92</sup> Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 44.

<sup>93</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 35.



slave trade, can be attributed directly to the practice of forced breeding between enslaved Africans.<sup>94</sup>

The con(strain) of black bodies and slavery was not limited to plantations in the South. In urban areas, enslaved Africans often hired out their time, working as household servants, hotel servants, barbers, caterers, tailors. Although some of these enslaved black people lived apart from their owners, they were the property of whites and paid the majority of the wages they earned to their slave masters.<sup>95</sup> In some cases, if an enslaved African was very frugal, hardworking, and skilled laborers, they may be able to save enough money to purchase their freedom.<sup>96</sup> Even though the purchase of freedom was possible in some situations, because these enslaved African's bodies were the property of whites, this possibility was the exception, not the rule. The price for freedom and the decision to allow a black person to purchase their freedom was at the discretion of the slave owner, never the decision of the enslaved.

Dominant white society benefited from the (con)strain of black bodies in two major ways and demonstrates the way that the hierarchical surveillance ordered both white and black bodies. First, the broken, ravished, and overworked bodies of black people and the blood, sweat and tears that streamed from their bodies into the clothes, fields and floors served as the economic foundation for the United States,

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<sup>94</sup> Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 38.

<sup>95</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 88.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

both in the North and the South. For example, agricultural products such as cotton were sold to Northern states. They utilized the raw materials from the Southern plantations to produce textiles for distribution throughout the United States and for export to other countries.<sup>97</sup> Secondly, socially, the labor of the enslaved Africans and African Americans allowed for some plantations owners and their families to live the leisurely life. In other words, the labor of the slaves left the slaveholders the free time to participate in the luxuries of life outside of the home such as spending time to become educated, participate in social life such as hosting parties, and participate in the political life.<sup>98</sup> The (con)stain of black bodies, then, was essential in the development of ideal whiteness and therefore became the contradiction — the opposite of whiteness.

The con(strain) of black bodies continued on even after institution of slavery was legally abolished in the United States. After the end of slavery as an institution, black bodies remained under control and surveillance by the laws and institutions of the land. In addition, discourse surrounding ideas and believes about black bodies were used in the creation of black bodies as criminal and dangerous. These discourses were promoted to control the geo-spatial location of black bodies, often keeping them separate from white bodies, except for cases in which the proximity benefited the economic and lifestyle of white citizens. As historian, Mark Smith, puts it, during Reconstruction and beyond, whites used sensory stereotypes to

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>98</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 106.

control when, where, and how blacks and whites could interact.<sup>99</sup> Whites determined when and how blacks and whites could interact socially and physically.

Perhaps the court decision that most influenced the tone of separation in the United States like *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1892. Homer Plessy sued the Louisiana railroads for kicking him out of a first-class train couch, despite the fact that he purchased a ticket. The case eventually went to the United State Supreme Court, which ruled that racial segregation was constitutional as long as accommodations are equal. This ruling became commonly known as “separate but equal.” Despite the ruling, access to equal accommodations remained dramatically unequal. With this ruling from the United States Supreme Court limited black access to “transportation, public accommodations, schools, colleges, swimming pools, libraries, and any other public spaces.”<sup>100</sup> In addition to this monumental case that set the tone of separation between blacks and whites, there were several other cases in between 1895 and 1903 that supported the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling that gave state support for segregative practices throughout the United States.

Although they were no longer subject to the direct control and abuse by slave owners, former bondsmen and bondswomen in the United States were excluded from the political, educational, and economic engagement in American society. They were closed off from easy access to American life. Although the Emancipation

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<sup>99</sup> Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, 1 edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 70–71.

<sup>100</sup> Painter, *Creating Black Americans*, 142.

Proclamation and the subsequent Northern defeat of Southern forces effectively ended slavery, blacks were still under (con)strain, and longed to enjoy the benefits of American citizenship implied by the apparent end of the slave-based economic system.

W. E. B. DuBois argues that even though the United States government introduced the Bureau of Emancipation to help the former black bondsmen in their transition from slavery to freedom, this project never fulfilled its purpose.<sup>101</sup> During Reconstruction, three issues were of much concern for former black bonds persons: political power, civil rights, and education.<sup>102</sup> Black leaders, for fifteen years or so after the end of slavery, advocated for the accumulation of wealth, industrial education, and mending the relationship between freed blacks and their former slave masters in the South.<sup>103</sup> These efforts were met stiffly with practices, laws, and traditions that effectively left the former bonds persons with disenfranchised economic and political life, legal civil suppression, and underfunded institutions of higher education.<sup>104</sup> Economic disenfranchisement continued, which after slavery, was made illegal in the South. Although the institution of slavery did not bind black people, it was still difficult for them to make ends meet and accumulate wealth. The demand for cotton, the main crop of Southern plantations, had more than doubled since the end of slavery and by 1890. More of the world's cotton fetish was satisfied

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<sup>101</sup> DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 20.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

by black labor. Cotton picked by black hands still remained king. However, in his essay entitled, "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece," W. E. B. DuBois argued that the economic system in the South for blacks changed from one that depended on free, black labor to one that intentionally kept black former slaves in debt. This new system prevented them from the making enough income to cover expenses.<sup>105</sup> The economy was no longer based on a master/slave relationship. It was based on the lender/debtor relationship. According to DuBois, black freed persons, although they were no longer property of whites, remained indebted to whites because of the emergence of the merchant.

DuBois describes the merchant as a "curious institution," most likely because it seems to bleed into and control many parts of black life after slavery. According to DuBois, the merchant played the roles of banker, landlord, contractor, and master/absolute ruler. Several post-slavery conditions contributed to this environment: (1) former enslaved Africans were left with scarce financial resources in the wake of their freedom; (2) many of the plantations in the South were vacated in the South but still owned by former plantation masters; (3) farming and service work were the only labor skills that many freedmen developed during slavery. These three factors limited possibilities for freed blacks to earn a living beyond farming in a system often referred to as sharecropping. The merchant system in conjunction with falling prices for cotton made it difficult for black farmers to make

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 101.

a profit on the sell of the crops. Merchants would often “front” monthly rations, farming equipment, and crop seed to freed blacks for a portion of the crop once it was raised and harvested. The loan, or consignment of daily rations was also secured by collateral — a mule or some farm equipment owned by the farmer. If the crop underproduced, or failed, the black farmer would not be able to pay for his/her rations by cotton crop only. The merchant refused to take cash and came to collect the collateral. This arrangement protected the merchants from the risk of financial loss in light of the fluctuating crop prices on the market and kept the black farmer in perpetual debt. In addition, since merchants determined the medium of exchange in this arrangement, it forced black farmers to limit their farming to cotton crops.

In conjunction with the merchant system, several written and implied laws functioned to restrict the rights and geo-spatial movement of freed black peoples in the South. First, tenant laws gave power to the merchant and the landowner in matters of debt repayment and rent payment. According to DuBois, merchants would watch the cotton crop, waiting for the crop to be ready for harvest. They would then take the crop, pay themselves back for the loan to the black farmer, pay the landowner, and then return any remaining crops to the farmer. There was no way for the black farmer to ensure that he or she had been paid fairly from the crop they raised and there was no legal recourse for the farmer in these situations.

According to Kelly Brown Douglas, white citizens believed that black bodies must be restricted, corralled, and restrained, keeping them from coming in contact with white cherished bodies.<sup>106</sup> She mentions other laws and traditions, including black codes, vagrancy laws, lynching during Reconstruction, which were designed to segregate black bodies and white bodies.<sup>107</sup> These laws defined particular behaviors such as "insulting gestures" toward whites as crimes. Any violation of these laws led to the vigorous disciplining of black bodies. Take, for example, Mississippi vagrancy laws during this period. One law states that after January 1866, "all freedmen, free Negroes, and Mulattos" of age found in the state without legal employment or gathering together during daytime or nighttime would be deemed criminals.<sup>108</sup> Vagrancy laws and lynching functioned as replacement penal systems for disciplinary power in their era.

During post-Reconstruction times, contact between white bodies and black bodies continued to be an issue that dominated discourse within the United States. Many states, passed laws that continued to regulate black bodies. For example, 29 states passed laws forbidding miscegenation between people from different races.<sup>109</sup> In addition to laws like these, there were also customs that governed etiquette in the event of an interracial social exchange. These customs dictated the

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<sup>106</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 68–69.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–32.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>109</sup> Joint Commission on Unification of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church South, *Proceedings ...* (Methodist Book Concern, 1920), 168.

rules of engagement for both blacks and whites. Many of the customs were never made into law, but the violation of these unwritten rules could lead to the death of black people. The customs included rules such as how a black person should address a white person when speaking to them, when to stand and when to sit when engaging in interracial dialogue, regulations for shaking hands with a person from another race, and rules about driving when a black person encountered a white person.<sup>110</sup> With all of these laws and customs, black people were supposed to stay in their place and avoid offending the white citizens of the United States.

Convinced that black people would never gain access to equal accommodations as citizens in the United States under the “separate but equal” regime, African Americans began protesting. This resistance to these geo-spatial and public restrictions became the Civil Rights Movement. Eddie Glaude argues that marching during the Civil Rights Movement was effective because black citizens were dealing with issues of space.<sup>111</sup> Because African Americans were under the (con)strain of a political, social, and economic system that forced the separation (e.g., blacks were not allowed to the same bathrooms, attend the same schools, or eat in the same restaurants as whites). So, a mass of black bodies sharing space with whites, and marching together in protest was a direct challenge to the issue that was at hand.

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<sup>110</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 75.

<sup>111</sup> Eddie S. Glaude Jr, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*, Reprint edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 137.



Although one may point to the legal victories of the Civil Rights Movement and the implementation of the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 as the end of separate but equal in the United States, segregation and the separation of black and white bodies continued beyond this time period.<sup>112</sup> Government supported segregation continued as a strong tradition in the United States, especially in urban cities throughout the North and the West. Despite the law passed in 1968, which banned discrimination in housing sales and rentals,<sup>113</sup> the separation and subsequent (con)strain of black bodies, which confined them to particular areas, was enforced by both local police and white citizens and led to dangerous and violent confrontations. Because of the inherent danger to whites, black bodies must be restricted, corralled, and restrained, keeping them from coming in contact with white bodies.<sup>114</sup> Several laws and traditions, including black codes, vagrancy laws, lynching, redlining and other housing policies during the New Deal, were designed to segregate black bodies and white bodies.<sup>115</sup> These laws, rules, and traditions restricted the black bodies to spaces determined by suitable for black bodies. The ghetto in Northern, urban cities is an example of such space.

A ghetto generally refers to a particular residential area of a city in which one ethnic or racial group is segregated into. Around the globe, the ghetto is a term that

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<sup>112</sup> *Shades of White Flight: Evangelical Congregations and Urban Departure* by Mark T. Mulder (Rutgers University Press, 1882), 1.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>114</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 68–69.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–32.

represents the idea of a geographic space that is immobile. Sociologist, Loïc Wacquant argues that ghetto should be defined as “relations of ethnoracial control and closure that combines stigma, coercion, territorial confinement and institutional parallelism.”<sup>116</sup> Youth often apply the idea to their local context and narrate the trials and tribulations and identities that are unique to their location.<sup>117</sup> The term ghetto was first used in reference to an island in the city called “Ghetto Nuovo” which was designated as the place where Jewish people were secured in Venice during the sixteenth century. The island allowed for the mainstream population of Venice to interact safely with while profiting from a population that they saw as potentially dangerous.<sup>118</sup> The idea of isolating people in the Jewish diaspora spread throughout Europe and culminated in the 20th century in the Warsaw ghetto, where Polish Jews were incarcerated and killed by the Nazis.<sup>119</sup>

Ghettos became prevalent in the United States when Southern blacks migrated to the North and the West in an effort to seek out better economic opportunity and escape the (con)strain of the Jim Crow in the South. The mass movement of black bodies has become known as the Great Migration. Ghettos became commonplace in urban areas throughout the United States. The influx of black bodies into the cities, which heavily depended on the manufacturing industry,

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<sup>116</sup> Rivke Jaffe, “Talkin’ ’bout the Ghetto: Popular Culture and Urban Imaginaries of Immobility,” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36.4 (July 2012): 676.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 675.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

threatened the social structures that were already established. In response to the flood of blacks into the established neighborhoods, white citizens and homeowners established zoning changes and intimidated the new black residents. Because these practices were not totally successful in keeping African Americans and whites separate, whites decided to leave the city for the suburbs in the phenomena, which has come to be known as white flight.<sup>120</sup> White flight continues today and is a major influence in the creation and maintenance of the ghetto<sup>121</sup> in addition to more institutionally supported practices such as redlining, which has been carried out by churches, government, real estate companies, insurance agencies, and mortgage companies. These practices created hyper segregated areas of the city where African Americans were confined to one or two areas, while whites occupied suburbia.<sup>122</sup>

Ghettos are not limited to the northern United States. They spread to urban environments like the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles, California, and are a result of the ghettoization of urban cities and the phenomena known as white flight. As blacks migrated from the South to the North and West for better economic opportunities, they were corralled into particular neighborhoods. For example, former Slauson member, Bird, describes the founding of the Slauson gang (possibly the first African American “gang” in the Watts neighborhood in Los Angeles, CA

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<sup>120</sup> *Shades of White Flight*, 2.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

formed in the 1960s) as a result violent confrontations between blacks and whites as blacks attempted to cross Alameda Blvd into white neighborhoods. Slauson is the name of the city park that black kids where confined to play at in the Watts area of Los Angeles. Bird argues that there was an invisible line at Alameda Blvd. Other kids from local schools and police made sure that black people were not allowed to cross. When they were caught in the wrong neighborhood, on the other side of Alameda, police harassed, beat, and wrongfully arrested black people. This continuous, unjust harassment by police for crossing over Alameda Boulevard led to the Watts riot in 1965.<sup>123</sup> Through the creation and maintenance of ghettos by using discriminatory housing, funding, and real estate practices that steered black bodies into certain areas, the white gaze was able to keep watch over and corral a large number of black bodies in a few reserved, geographical/geo-spatial areas. The ghetto functions like an observatory – a tool of disciplinary power, valuing them as only useful for labor and ranking them as a class of people that fail to match white ideals.

Because black bodies are seen as less valuable than white bodies, the urgency for white supremacy to invest in black bodies corralled in urban inner city ghettos remains minimal. The visible absence of white bodies was not the only effect of white flight. Along with the retreat of whites to the suburbs, public and private funding and investment into the urban areas of the city, occupied by African

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<sup>123</sup> Stacy Peralta, *Crips and Bloods: Made in America* (Docurama, 2009).

Americans, disappeared. Take for example, the funding of community spaces such as urban swimming pools in the wake of white flight. When African Americans began to enter urban neighborhoods in the North and the West, cities began to face the possibility of integrating public swimming pools. Rather than integrate the public, community swimming pools, many cities decided to close them. This led to whites, many of which moved to suburban areas, to swim in private pools in their backyards.<sup>124</sup>

Likewise, public services such as education have suffered in ghettoized regions of urban cities. Jonathan Kozol is critical of the way that the education system is funded to ensure equality and quality of education between urban and suburban schools.<sup>125</sup> For example, in 1989, Chicago spent approximately \$5,500 for each student in its secondary schools. In suburban areas, north of Chicago, \$8,500-9,000 was spent per student. For a class of 30 kids, this could be a difference of approximately \$90,000 in funding for one classroom.<sup>126</sup> Kozol goes on to explain that funding for education is financed by a tax on local real and personal property. The property tax depends on the taxable value of homes in the locality and of local industries. A typical wealthy suburb, in which homes are often worth more than \$400,000, draws upon a larger tax base in proportion to its student population than

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<sup>124</sup> Adam Sobsey, “Whatever Happened to Public Swimming Pools?,” *Indy Week*, August 1, 2007, <http://www.indyweek.com/indyweek/whatever-happened-to-public-swimming-pools/Content?oid=1203085>.

<sup>125</sup> Jonathan Kozol, *Savage Inequalities: Children in America’s Schools* By Jonathan Kozol, 7.4.1992 edition (Harper Perennial, 1992), 74–75.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

urbanized ghettos. Even if the tax rate is higher in the ghetto, the city will raise less capital than in affluent areas with a lesser tax rate because the home values and business presence are much higher in majority white populated areas of the city and the suburbs.<sup>127</sup> Kozol concludes that there is no way that urban and suburban students will receive the same quality of education with such disparity in the funding in the classroom. The white, suburban communities, which are most likely homeowners, benefit. Since property tax is a federal tax deduction, many homeowners in the suburb get back a substantial portion of the money they spend to fund their children's public school effectively. It functions as a federal subsidy for an unequal education. This creates a large disparity among poor and rich; between homeowners in a wealthy neighborhood and renters/homeowners in a poor, urban area.<sup>128</sup>

In addition to public spaces such as swimming pools, ghettos are often left with few businesses, limited public transportation, and minimal economic opportunities such as employment. This leaves ghettos cut off from the rest of the city in a way that keeps its residents grasping and gasping to reach for access to the promise of advancement. Take for another example Altgeld Gardens Public housing project on the South side of Chicago, Illinois. This particular ghettoized community was originally built on top of a landfill in 1945 in order to house black families of

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

World War II veterans, who worked in the local steel mills and factories nearby.<sup>129</sup>

Over 50 percent of its residents, almost all African American, live below the poverty line. The neighborhood consists of mainly 2-story apartment buildings and is located in-between the Little Calumet River, a freeway, and a sewage treatment plant. Because of the smell of waste from the sewage treatment plant and the landfill underneath its foundation, it has also been called the “toxic doughnut.”<sup>130</sup> Altgerld Gardens is cut off from the rest of Chicago because the nearest public train station, which would grant easy access to downtown Chicago is 35 blocks away. Public bus transportation is available; however, it takes about 1.5 hours to make the 18-mile trip to downtown by bus.<sup>131</sup>

Kelly Brown Douglas argues, however, argues that restrictive space in regard to where black people can go, geographically, is not limited to invisible lines on streets that police, white citizens, and others with implied authority guard with deadly force. In *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, Douglas attempt to answer why black bodies continue to be by violated and killed despite the legislative, and legal victories that African Americans achieved in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Douglas argues that any free black body that is free is deemed dangerous and out of place because it threatens the established social order of Anglo Saxon exceptionalism by entering white space and

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<sup>129</sup> Dwyer Gunn, “Breaking the Code of the Streets,” *Psychology Today*, July 2016, 70.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

challenging the idea of white supremacy. White space is anywhere where white bodies exist. According to the myth, freedom is a right and property of whiteness and thus, if a black body possesses freedom, it possessed something that it does not have a right to — something that belongs to whites. Because of the inherent danger to whites, black bodies must be restricted, corralled, and restrained, keeping them from coming in contact with white cherished bodies.<sup>132</sup> In order to show how the freedom of black physical bodies have been restrained, Douglas, traces several laws and traditions, including black codes, vagrancy laws, lynching, redlining and other housing policies during the New Deal, which were designed to segregate black bodies and white bodies.<sup>133</sup> These laws and traditions, continue to limit the physical, political, and social space that black bodies can occupy freely. When black bodies cross over into white space, he/she does so at the risk of being killed by whites, often without criminal charges or prosecution for the white aggressor.

#### **2.1.4. Tattooing and Black Culture**

So far in this chapter, I have argued that the white gaze represents the collective ideals of white supremacy and functions as the disciplinary power apparatus of white society in regards to the black body. In order to illustrate the ways in which the white gaze places black bodies in (con)strain, I have outlined historic ways black bodies have been geo-spatially effected by the white gaze. In

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<sup>132</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 68–69.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 116–32.



this section of the chapter, we will turn to black culture, with special attention to tattooing because tattooing has emerged as significant cultural product in the African American community and has been overlooked as a viable source for religious studies. It is often a way that people express and display their religious values, beliefs, and commitments. Tattoos often signify an internal struggle such as conversion, shift in lifestyle or ethics, loss, or other significant events in one's life and points toward subjectivity.

In order to understand more deeply how the internal world, the world of the mind, emotions, and feelings work to produce black culture from an environment marred by white oppression, I will turn to somaesthetics. Somaesthetics is a branch of philosophy concerned with the body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation and creative self-fashioning.<sup>134</sup> It seeks to increase our understanding of both abstract, discursive knowledge of the body and our lived bodily experience and performance.<sup>135</sup> In addition, it posits that mental life relies on bodily experiences and cannot be separated from the body's biochemical process, nor can it be totally reduced to them.<sup>136</sup> Somaesthetic philosophers such as Mark Johnson and Richard Shusterman, attempt to erase mind/body duality inherent in much of philosophy and religious studies by highlighting the importance of the body and its biochemical

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<sup>134</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body: Essays in Somaesthetics*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 27.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

and sensory processes in the production of reason, language, and cultural production.

Mark Johnson argues that mind and body are not separate things. They are aspects of one organic process. As a consequence, all our meaning, thought, and language emerge from the aesthetic dimensions of this embodied activity. Chief among those aesthetic dimensions are qualities, images, patterns of sensorimotor processes, and emotions.<sup>137</sup> For Johnson, to understand how we create and understand meaning, we must first pay attention to bodily movement. Through movement, humans began to sense and experience and perceive the world. Much of our perceptual knowledge comes from movement, both our bodily motions and our interactions with moving objects.<sup>138</sup> As we move through space we are constantly in contact with our environment(s) (social, political, religious, etc.). According to Johnson, “We are in touch with our world at a visceral level, and it is the quality of our ‘being in touch’ that importantly defines what our world is like and who we are.”<sup>139</sup>

Meaning not only involves the movement of the body, but also involves bodily processes, which operate automatically and unconsciously. These processes help make possible our more conscious acts of meaning-making, such as our use of language, and include emotions and feelings among other bodily systems like

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<sup>137</sup> Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, Reprint edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 20.

metabolism and pain. For Johnson, meaning is intimately tied to emotions, many of which we remain unaware.<sup>140</sup> Emotions are bodily processes which largely operate unconsciously and arise from “the perception of ongoing changes within the an organism that require some transforming activity, either to continue the harmonious flow of experience or to help re-establish equilibrium in response to a perceived imbalance or disruptions within the organism.”<sup>141</sup> Feelings, then are the conscious awareness of an emotion.<sup>142</sup> Our emotional responses are based on both our non-conscious and conscious assessments of the possible harm, nurturance, or enhancement that a given situation may bring to our lives.<sup>143</sup> The continuous appraisal and reevaluation of our environment shows how important emotions are in creating meaning. As long as emotions help us assess and respond to our continually changing environments, we are taking the measure of our situation.<sup>144</sup>

Cultural products and practices such as language, architecture, music, art, rituals, and public institutions “preserve aspects of meaning as objective features of the world.”<sup>145</sup> These cultural products are meaningful in the sense that they are enacted in the lives of living, breathing human beings who “use the language, live by the symbols, sing and appreciate the music, participate in the rituals, and reenact

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 152.

the practices and values of institutions.”<sup>146</sup> Meaning requires a living body that engages its social, cultural, physical, and biological environments.

With this in mind, Johnson argues that aesthetics is not simply a philosophical theory about art. In fact, it is the study of how humans make and experience meaning.

In the visual arts, for example, the way humans experience images, patterns, qualities, colors, and perceptual rhythms gives art its meaning. And at times, we cannot even verbally express that which we have experienced in our encounter with an artwork.

Johnson highlights how the creation of meaning is an embodied, partially conscious and partially unconscious, activity that is the result of us continuously assessing our environment. It also speaks to the way in which cultural production is an embodied response to one's environment. As a result of our environment, we create cultural products which help us both physically and psychologically create balance in our lives. In this light, cultural production is powered by our emotions and feelings. It says something about who we are and what we are experiencing. Cultural production is aesthetic, an external expression of an internal emotion or feeling.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

Richard Shusterman, is critical, however, about the way society has classified particular types of cultural production and taken it away from the masses. In *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, aesthetics extends to the social and political realms as we reflect on how it operates in the praxis of life. He is concerned with freeing aesthetics from its limited, restricted use in the analysis of fine art and extending the discussion of aesthetics to more popular forms of cultural expression, like rock music and hip hop. For Shusterman, the ultimate goal of aesthetic, cultural production is to improve the experience of human beings. To do this, aesthetics must address lived experience and new artistic forms, including popular culture.<sup>147</sup>

Following John Dewey, Shusterman argues that aesthetic understanding and concepts like art and beauty lie in the “basic vital function,” “the biological commonplaces” man shares with “bird and beast.” Art is the product of interaction between the living organism and its environment. Though the fine arts have become increasingly more spiritualized, emotional energy is what gives art life. Both, the artist and the perceiver, must engage their natural feelings, their energy, and their physiological sensorimotor responses in order to appreciate art. Art is restructured into something meaningful based on all three aspects of this engagement.<sup>148</sup> Shusterman argues that the removal of art from the lives of

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<sup>147</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), ix.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 6–7.

common people and its quarantine to the museum, concert hall, classroom, and theater, kept apart from free and casual daily access, and as a result, diminished the aesthetic quality of our lives.

According to Shusterman, art's role is to change reality and that ability for change is limited when art is relegated to places only assessable to high society. In the end, he argues that art should be removed from its sacred, compartmentalized spaces and introduced into the realm of everyday living where it may more effectively "function as a guide, model, and impetus for constructive reform, rather than merely an imported adornment or a wishfully imaginary alternative to the real."<sup>149</sup> Shusterman's aesthetic theory creates a place for forms of art to be legitimized among the masses. He acknowledges both forms of art that he wants to legitimize, rock music and hip hop, are the creations of African American people. Like rock and roll and hip hop, other forms of black culture are born out of the condition of black bodies in (con)strain, the physical and psychological restriction of black bodies in the context of American oppression.

In the field of African American religious studies, scholars such as James Cone, Katie Cannon, Dwight Hopkins, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Anthony Pinn have used black culture as source material for African American religion, theology, and ethics. According to James Cone, black culture is one of the sources. Other sources

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 20–21.

include black experience, black history, revelation, scripture, and tradition.<sup>150</sup> In addition to the sources that Cone suggests for the development of theology, Katie Cannon argues that black women's literary tradition is a source for understanding a black religious ethical system because it a true depiction of African American life.<sup>151</sup> Cannon argues that black women who write literature hold themselves accountable to collective values that underlie history and culture.<sup>152</sup> In addition, patterns and themes in their writing reflect historical facts, sociological realities, and religious traditions in the black community.<sup>153</sup> Because Black women's literature is always reflective of black history, black tradition, and culture, it is a reasonable source for ethics. Others, for example Dwight Hopkins, have suggested other sources in addition to those already mentioned such as African American women's spirituality, black culture, black politics, black social analysis, and black social vision, and blues.<sup>154</sup>

Black culture then, operating in the environment of white supremacy, which creates the conditions of racism, segregation and radicalized discourse about African Americans and black bodies in general, works to represent black bodies in

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<sup>150</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th Anniversary edition (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2010), 23–35.

<sup>151</sup> Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* : (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2006), 90.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>154</sup> Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Orbis Books, 1993), 7–9; Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (Continuum, 1999).

an alternative light than white supremacy. It has its base in the experiences, pleasures, memories and traditions of black people. In this sense, black culture, is grotesque — it is vulgar because it does not conform to high culture, or dominate white culture.<sup>155</sup> Values, dreams, hopes and desires are often internal emotions and feelings that are expressed in black culture. Black culture, especially in its musical production, is oral and gives attention to the localized communities of black communities. Some of the marks of black culture are its development of counter narratives and the metaphorical use of vocabulary.<sup>156</sup> It is connected to the local hope, aspirations, tragedies, and the mundane practices of people in every day life.<sup>157</sup>

Apart from the cultural products that have been given much attention in African American religious studies other cultural products have emerged since and have become more acceptable in the United States and utilized within the African American community. Tattooing is a form of body modification, a variety of techniques performed by changing one or more parts of the body from the natural state into a consciously designed state.<sup>158</sup> It is performed by the process of puncturing the skin and inserting dark pigment into the dermis to the depth of between 0.25 and 0.5 centimeter, using a sharp instrument. Depending on culture,

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<sup>155</sup> Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” *Social Justice* 20, no. 1 (1993): 108.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 107–8.

<sup>158</sup> Theresa M. M. Winge, *Body Style* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 6.



tradition, or geography, the instruments used to tattoo may be made of metal, wood, shell, or bone. Although modern, American tattooists typically use ink, the pigment used in tattooing can be made of soot, pine resin or charcoal mixed with oil.<sup>159</sup>

The process of becoming tattooed includes pain as well as the process of having one's memories and dreams, birthed in the mind, come to life in their skin and on the bodies.<sup>160</sup> It alters the physical state of the body and is an expression of the structures of the mind. Memories and dreams are derived from the unconscious and often take the form of symbols and myths. According to Carl Jung, symbols are the language of the unconscious. They stand for something more than its apparent everyday meaning.

Over the past few decades, tattooing has emerged as a cultural product that has been appropriated by African American people. Its popularity within the African American community has increased dramatically. It is fairly easy to find black tattoo artists and black owned tattoo shops in urban areas all around the country. The popularity of tattooing has led to the production of several popular television shows, including a franchise that focuses on African American tattooing, "Black Ink Crew," and Black Ink Crew: Chicago."

Utilizing the ink and the machinery involved in the tattooing processes, artists oftentimes tattoo religious symbols, scriptures, ideas, and sayings on their

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<sup>159</sup> Paul Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 126.

<sup>160</sup> DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 23–24.

clients' bodies. In addition, people utilize tattooing to mark their commitment or affiliation with their family or a social group, to memorialize a life's journey or some significant moment, to represent some aspect of their identity, to mark dissatisfaction of mainstream society, or for simple aesthetic reasons. As Margo DeMello argues:

Tattoos are fundamentally a means of expressing identity, both personal and collective. Tattoos inscribe a person's relationship to society, to others, and to him or herself, and they do so in a manner that is visible not only to the wearer but to others as well. Except when worn in private areas, tattoos are meant to be read by others. For this reason tattoos as identity markers are not merely private expressions of the need to 'write oneself,' but they express the need for others to read them a certain way as well.<sup>161</sup>

As DeMello expressed, tattooing is a form of writing oneself. In light of the white gaze and the way that it seeks to control, monitor, judge and limit black bodies, the act of tattooing because an act of agency and self-creation. One is "taking back" control some level of control over one's body. It is a form of subjectivity. As Henry Pointer stated during my interview with him:

It's like one of those things...African Americans have been what to do with their bodies for so long...I think it's a self-expression thing. You're told what to do. You're told how to dress - how not to dress. I think it is an important part of self-expression for real.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*, 1st edition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2000), 137.

<sup>162</sup> Henry Pointer, interview by Jason Jeffries, October 1, 2016.

As a high school teacher, Pointer is conscious of his tattoo, especially when he is at work. He is careful not to allow his tattoos to become an issue for the school administration or the parents of his students. In order to cover them, he wears long-sleeve shirts as to not display them on working hours.<sup>163</sup> Although his act of subjectivity does not necessarily free him from any web of power, he is able to design and create his body in a manner that is pleasing and meaningful in his eyes.

In this chapter, I have argued that black Culture is born out of embodied, emotional expressions from people of African descent whose primary embodied experience is (con)strain, or oppression. The white gaze, which functions as the collective consciousness of white supremacy and the disciplinary power mechanism of white power, symbolizes oppression. The white gaze works to observe, classify, judge, and normalize the intentions and movements of black bodies. Because of this restriction, black bodies experience both physical and psychological trauma. Because scholars of religion have utilized black culture in the development of their religious thought and since tattooing in the African American has become more common, I suggest that we utilize tattooing in the African American community as a source for the development of further religious thought. In the next chapter, I will discuss the relationship between tattooing, the inner world, and the white gaze.

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<sup>163</sup> Pointer.

## Chapter 3

# Making and Marking Meaningful Bodies

In the previous chapter, I discussed how black bodies have been (con)strained geo-spatially in the United States through slavery, Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, and until today. Restrictions, such as Jim Crow and discriminatory housing practices were created by white supremacy and supported by custom, tradition, and laws established during these time periods. The restrictions against black people in American society were enforced using various methods, such as brutal violence, imprisonment, and death toward black bodies. As a result, black bodies have been mangled, marked, made docile, and killed. However, we would be remised to only discuss the physical trauma and painful death that black bodies have encountered. The primary experience of black bodies in the United States is the experience of (con)strain. (Con)strain is the condition and the experience of having one's body physically and psychologically limited and

is caused by the white gaze. Black bodies are restricted because the white gaze defines black bodies as something other than human. Tattooing, in light of the light of disciplining power, may function as a form of subjectivity – a way to signal that they are, in some way, taking their body back from the control and definitions that the white gaze has ascribed to it.

In this chapter, we will discuss the psychological effects of the ways in which black bodies have lived under (con)strain and the ways in which body modification is a balm for the strain caused by the white gaze. First, we will discuss how black bodies are seen through the white gaze. Second, we will explore how the gaze is internalized into the psyche creating a distorted view of black bodies. Last, we will discuss the significance of body modification in correcting the distorted view of the person who has internalized the white gaze.

The psychological aspect of (con)strain, strain, may be defined as the psychological internalization of the white gaze and its discourse. The internalization of the white gaze is experienced as a battle between the ego and super ego. The white gaze is idealized in the mind of black bodies. Whiteness and its gaze, then, functions like a super ego, imposing its standard of beauty, its morals and ethics upon black egos. These standards are fleeting for black bodies because of white supremacy. This internal, psychological, and emotional battle between the idealized white gaze, as superego, and black egos contained in black bodies results in psychological trauma. Because black bodies are in (con)strain, black culture is one of the most prominent options African Americans have to express their

emotions and feeling – it is one of the ways in which they are able to contemplate, debate, and create life meaning in the context of oppression. One of the most lasting effects of restricting and disciplining bodies is the damage to the psyche that occurs as a result from such discipline. The mental damage occurs as a result of the discipline and the white gaze, or the discursive myths, stereotypes developed by white fear of black bodies. Both of these groups, whites and blacks internalize the pain inflicted on black bodies. On one hand, white people internalize the myths and stereotypes of their creation, which causes them to see black bodies as something grotesque, fantastic creatures that create both mystery and fear. On the other hand, black people see whiteness as something to desire and envy. It becomes a sort of love object that is never satisfied with the black body. It is my position that modification of the black body, then, is a way that black people responded to the judgment of the white gaze.

### **3.1.1. The Black Grotesque Through White Gazes**

Through the lenses of the white gaze, black bodies are seen as grotesque. Black bodies, through racialized myths and stereotypes, have been represented as grotesque bodies - as bodies relegated to eating, sexuality, and violence. There are three categories of the grotesque: the monstrous, the burlesque, and the comedic.<sup>164</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, argues that all three of these categories have something in common. In his review and

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<sup>164</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 1st edition (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1968), 304–5.

reflection on the images of grotesque bodies in Medieval literature, he argued that grotesque bodies are bodies which have been relegated to lower regions or to nature.<sup>165</sup> In other words, grotesque bodies are reduced to eating, sexuality, and urine, and excrement. The lower regions of grotesque figures, in Medieval literature, such as the genitals and anus, are emphasized.

Images of grotesque bodies are portrayed as protruding, as if the innards and internal fluids are about to be exposed to the outside. Particularly, the nose, the mouth, the ears, the eyes are depicted as bulging and exaggerated.<sup>166</sup> Although these parts of the body are in the upper region of the body, they represent the phallus, especially the nose.<sup>167</sup> This type of exaggeration, according to Bakhtin, alludes to an open body. The bulging body parts point to boundaries between the body and the world. The mouth, for example, is one of the body's openings and serves as one way that materials from the external world can enter and contaminate the body.<sup>168</sup> An open body implies that there is no distinction between the natural world and the body, and that the grotesque body is devoid of reason. They are relegated to functioning only for survival and reproduction, similar to a virus or an animal.

When we think about the lower regions of the body, especially the genitals, we generally think of sexuality and sexual desire. In many instances, grotesque bodies are viewed as hyper-sexualized bodies. For many, references to the lower region of the body

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 309–17.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 16–17.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 316–17.

and to bulging eyes, open mouths, protruding noses, which Bhaktin argues are symbolic of the phallus, automatically is a reference to sexual desire. While one must definitely include sexual desire in the interpretation of the portrayal of grotesque bodies and images, it would be an oversight to only consider sexuality. The openings of the body point to life, creativity, and transformation. For example, food that enters the mouth is transformed into energy and the portion that is not useful for energy is expelled from the body in the form of waste. The food is necessary to sustain life and the waste that expels from the anus or genitals may be used as fertilizer to continue or create new life in the form of plants. In addition, genitals are also capable of creation and transformation. In many ways, grotesque bodies represent the treat of reproduction and invoke at once both awe and fear. They are dangerous bodies, always threatening to spill over and contaminate.

### **3.1.2. The Pain of Dark Skin**

In addition to being viewed as grotesque, black bodies are also seen as resistant to pain. As historian Mark Smith argues, although sight has been the primary sense used in both identifying and discussing race, other sensory perceptions are critical in determining and identifying race. Sensory perception functioned in two ways during the colonial, antebellum, and reconstruction time periods. Smell and touch, especially, were appropriated in two ways. The first appropriation of sense dealt with the white sensory



observation of black people.<sup>169</sup> For example, from the perspective of whites, the rank smell emitting from African bodies was similar to "other animals" and the thickness of their skin allowed them to feel less pain than humans.<sup>170</sup> The second appropriation of sensory perception is derived from what whites observe as enhanced physical characteristics of black bodies. For example, colonialist believed that Africans could see and hear much better than they could. They commonly were amazed at how the keen sensitivity of the black eye could see at distances far greater than whites or how they could hear the sound of their enemies at great distances.<sup>171</sup> Both of these arguments allowed white colonialist to classify blacks as animals and validated the mistreatment of African peoples.

Although some would argue that myths about the enhanced sensory abilities of black bodies have long been left behind, there are significant aspects of these beliefs that still exist in popular American imagination. Black bodies possessing thick skin is a rather significant belief that influences how black bodies are perceived during encounters with white supremacy in American society. Howard Thurman, for example, recalls an account when a child did not believe he could feel pain. As a thirteen-year-old boy, Thurman worked for a wealthy white family after school, raking leaves in their yard. This particular family had a daughter who was about age five. As Thurman would rake and collect the leaves from the yard into a pile, the little girl would follow him around the

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<sup>169</sup> Mark M. Smith, *How Race Is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses*, 1 edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 10.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9, 14–16.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

yard, often destroying his pile in order to find leaves of particular shapes that intrigued her. The little girl would then bring the leaves to Thurman, perhaps in hope that he would have the same aesthetic appreciation for the shapes and designs of the leaves that she had. This frustrated Thurman. One particular time, the little girl destroyed a pile of leaves that Thurman worked hard to gather and admonished that he was going to inform her father of her behavior. The little girl interpreted Thurman's action as a threat. In response, she took a pin out of the front of her dress and stuck Thurman in the hand with it. When Thurman pulled his hand back in reaction to being stuck with the pin and responded verbally, asking her if she had lost her mind. With amazement all over her face, the little looked at Thurman and said, "That didn't hurt you really! You can't feel!"<sup>172</sup>

At five years old, the little girl had already internalized a stereotype about black bodies and their ability to feel pain. Despite her close proximity with Thurman, as he worked for her family in their yard, and regardless of her play with him, she believed that her physical actions toward him could not harm him until he responded to her pin poking him through the skin. Even then, the authenticity of his pain response and his corresponding vocal outburst was questioned. This is because the human quality of experiencing pain was not afforded to black bodies.

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<sup>172</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1989), 7–9.

The idea of black bodies having thick skin has recently made its way back into the center of American popular culture in the form of African American superhero, "Luke Cage," whose real name is Carl Lucas.<sup>173</sup> The original superhero character was based on the Marvel comic series called "Luke Cage: Hero for Hire," which debuted in 1972 during the explosion of blaxploitation films.<sup>174</sup> It was the first time a comic book series was fully dedicated to an African American character. The comic book was set in Manhattan, New York City, near Times Square. During the 1970s, Manhattan was ridden with crime, drugs, and prostitution, mainly because of the city's financial troubles and extreme levels of poverty.<sup>175</sup> Lucas obtained his superhuman strength and his impenetrable skin while he was wrongfully accused of drug possession and served time behind bars. During his incarceration, he encountered racist corrections officer and was subjected to a medical experiment performed by scientist, Noah Burnstein who subsequently became a supporter of Lucas.<sup>176</sup> Due to an interruption by a racist corrections officer during the experiment, Lucas obtained his "super-strong skin and super-strength."<sup>177</sup> Lucas later escaped prison and then changed his name to Luke Cage in order to hide in the city while he sought revenge on the person who falsely accused

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<sup>173</sup> "Behind 'Luke Cage,' The Most Political Superhero Show Yet," *TIME.com*, accessed December 16, 2016, <http://time.com/luke-cage-team/>.

<sup>174</sup> "A Brief History of Luke Cage in the Comics," *Tor.com*, September 29, 2016, <https://www.tor.com/2016/09/29/a-brief-history-of-luke-cage-in-the-comics/>.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> "Behind 'Luke Cage,' The Most Political Superhero Show Yet."

<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

him and landed him in prison. At the same time, Luke Cage hired out his superhero services to the poor and victimized people of Manhattan.<sup>178</sup>

In the *Netflix* sponsored series, “Luke Cage,” we find Luke Cage living in Harlem as a bartender and a barbershop attendant. The backstory of the television series is similar to the comic series. However, we find Luke Cage with an updated look. Also, he refuses to charge people for his services.<sup>179</sup> Some critics endorse the series as an important political commentary in times of heightened racial injustice in American society.<sup>180</sup> In the television version of the series, the superhero often wears a hoodie, which has become a political symbol in support of Trayvon Martin, a teenager who was gunned down by George Zimmerman while he was walking home after purchasing a soda and some Skittles at a convenience store in Florida.<sup>181</sup> Zimmerman, participating in a neighborhood watch, thought Martin was out of place, in the mostly non-black neighborhood, and pursued Martin, assuming he was out of place. Zimmerman assumed Martin intended to commit some crime while present. The confrontation led to Martin's violent death as Zimmerman shot Martin in cold blood, claiming "self-defense."<sup>182</sup> The courts acquitted Zimmerman of any wrong doing and the verdict led to many protests comprised of African Americans supporters, social and religious leaders, and celebrities

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<sup>178</sup> “A Brief History of Luke Cage in the Comics.”

<sup>179</sup> “Behind ‘Luke Cage,’ The Most Political Superhero Show Yet.”

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> C. N. N. Library, “Trayvon Martin Shooting Fast Facts,” *CNN*, accessed January 18, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/05/us/trayvon-martin-shooting-fast-facts/index.html>.

within the African American community posting pictures of themselves on social media as a symbolic sign of solidarity and mourning.<sup>183</sup>

Despite the critical acclaim of the television series, there are ways in which Luke Cage supports and perpetuates negative, racialized ideas about the thickness of black skin, and as a result of that skin, their inability to feel pain. As the television series highlights, these myths about black bodies encourage more aggressive and unique forms of violence toward black bodies, especially when these bodies encounter white authority in the form of police. In the series, when Luke Cage is considered a public enemy, law enforcement obtains special bullets, specifically designed to penetrate Luke Cage's skin in an attempt to stop (kill) him.<sup>184</sup> An arrest and trial are not valid options for the officials in authority, save for police officer, Misty Knight, who grew up in Harlem.<sup>185</sup>

Luke Cage, as a television series, highlights the issue of black immunity to pain because of the thickness of their skin in popular television media. Although most people would publicly accept African Americans as part of the human race, one has to question the amount of extraordinary force utilized toward black bodies in their countless encounters with police authority.

A more recent example, which is often credited as the tragic event that started a series of protests over the next few years, is the shooting of Michael Brown by Officer

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<sup>183</sup> "Tragedy Gives The Hoodie A Whole New Meaning," *NPR.org*, accessed January 18, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2012/03/24/149245834/tragedy-gives-the-hoodie-a-whole-new-meaning>.

<sup>184</sup> "Watch Marvel's Luke Cage Online | Netflix," accessed January 18, 2017, <https://www.netflix.com/title/80002537>.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. The language Wilson used when describing the tragic event to the grand jury (whether one believes Wilson acted in self-defense or not) highlights the ways in which the officer perceived Brown's ability to endure pain during the moments of Brown's killing. Darren Wilson testified to a grand jury, which ultimately decided not to prosecute Wilson for the wrongful death or the murder of Michael Brown. After describing the encounter as Hulk Hogan (Brown) compared to a child (Wilson), Wilson states the following in regard to how many times he fired his weapon during the altercation with the teenager:

I know I miss a couple, I don't know how many, but I know I hit him at least once because I saw his body kind of jerk or flinched. I remember having tunnel vision on his right hand, that's all, I'm just focusing on that hand when I was shooting...Well, after the last shot my tunnel vision kind of opened up. I remember seeing the smoke from the gun and I kind of looked at him and he's still coming at me, he hadn't slowed down...At this point I start backpedaling and again, I tell him get on the ground, get on the ground, he doesn't. I shoot another round of shots. Again, I don't recall how many it was or if I hit him every time. I know at least once because he flinching again...At this point it looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting at him.

And the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way.

Well, he keeps coming at me after that again, during the pause I tell him to get on the ground, get on the ground, he still keeps coming at me, gets about 8 to 10 feet away. At this point I'm backing up pretty rapidly, I'm backpedaling pretty good because I know if he reaches me, he'll kill me...His hand was in a fist at his side, this one is in his waistband under his shirt, and he was like this. Just coming straight at me like he was going to run right through me. And when he gets about 8 to 10 feet away, I look down, I remember looking at my sites and firing, all I see is his

head and that's what I shot...I don't know how many, I know at least once because I saw the last one go into him. And then when it went into him, the demeanor on his face went blank, the aggression was going, it was gone, I mean, I knew he stopped...the threat was stopped.<sup>186</sup>

Brown's body was struck by 8 of Wilson's 13 bullets from various distances. Notice Wilson's description of Brown's body, as he continued to fire bullets at Brown. He describes Brown's body scientifically, as if he is discussing a physics experiment. Wilson testifies that he knows that Brown was struck by at least some of the bullets he fired, because Brown's body "jerked or flinched." This phenomenological description brings to mind childhood science lessons about Newtonian physics - an object in motion stays in motion until an equal and opposite force acts against it. That equal and opposite force was the material that made up Brown's body. Wilson makes no reference to anything that indicates that Brown felt pain from any of the eight bullets penetrating Brown's dermis, tearing through his organs, shattering his bones, ripping through his muscles, or rupturing his nerves. Wilson makes no reference to Brown crying out in pain as these bullets entered into him, causing fatal damage nor the sound of the bullets entering into Brown's body as his gun roared with fiery force. From Wilson's perspective, Brown could not and did not feel pain. This is further highlighted by Wilson's account as he repeatedly claimed that Brown became even more angry, as Wilson fired more bullets as Brown advanced toward him until he was ultimately shot in the head and fell face first into the ground.

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<sup>186</sup> Chris McDaniel, "Grand Jury Volume 05," 227–30, accessed December 18, 2016, <http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/1370494-grand-jury-volume-5.html>.

Before we give too much creditability to Wilson's account as an inerrant and infallible account of facts. We must keep in mind that Wilson was testifying in front of a grand jury, which was deciding whether to prosecute and imprison him for Brown's killing. First, he had been advised and prepared by his attorneys for this grand jury and his testimony was most likely presented in a manner that would give him the best chance to avoid prosecution. Second, there were other witnesses present at the scene that initially claimed that Brown had surrendered to Wilson and that he was on his knees with his hands up when he was fatally shot by Wilson. In fact, this version of the shooting has inspired the protest chant, "Hands up! Don't shoot!" that has become popular in many of the national protests against police brutality toward African Americans.<sup>187</sup>

### **3.1.3. Internalizing the Weighty, White Gaze**

The idea that black bodies are grotesque and resistant to pain is a function of the white gaze. One of the perils for African Americans living under the view of the gaze is that they may internalize the myths and images that are broadcast in society through media and other means. Franz Fanon points out that white people and black people within a society share the ideals promoted by the white gaze.<sup>188</sup> For this reason, people who live in black flesh face a unique amount of psychological pressure. Because the collective conscious in a white society has created myths and mistruths about black

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<sup>187</sup> Jonathan Capehart, "'Hands Up, Don't Shoot' Was Built on a Lie," *The Washington Post*, March 16, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2015/03/16/lesson-learned-from-the-shooting-of-michael-brown/?utm\\_term=.47e5f5348c2e](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/wp/2015/03/16/lesson-learned-from-the-shooting-of-michael-brown/?utm_term=.47e5f5348c2e).

<sup>188</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox, Revised edition (New York : Berkeley, Calif.: Grove Press, 2008), 124.



sexuality, black violence, and black intelligence as the anti-thesis of whiteness and/or white ideal, blacks see themselves in a negative light.<sup>189</sup> The cultural folk tales, literature, knowledge production, and attitudes within the society reinforce this idea. Either black people can convince others to ignore the color of their embodied flesh or invite people to notice them. Neither option is acceptable. In addition, these limited options in light of the constant realization of difference underneath the weighty white stare, causes black people to realize a dual reality. They are always viewed through someone else's eyes.<sup>190</sup>

Having dark skin often has both social and psychological consequences. In *Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois discusses the challenge of attaining self-consciousness in the African American experience. DuBois argues that black people living in American are denied true self-consciousness because they view themselves through the eyes of others.<sup>191</sup> According to DuBois, black people living in America always feel a sort of split: "an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body..."<sup>192</sup> Double consciousness is "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that look on in amused contempt and pity."<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>191</sup> W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 8.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 8–9.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., 8.

Double consciousness, I would argue, is the internalization of the white gaze. In the mind of person with a dark body living in America, there is a war occurring between the ideals of white society and the ideals one may have of themselves and/or their culture. In the case of this project, it is a war between the black bodies and the white gaze. Although DuBois argues that double consciousness prevents one from ever achieving self-consciousness, self-respect, and self-determination, I would argue that one is always attempting to achieve it. Intentionally deciding how one's body is altered and viewed through body modification is an attempt at self-consciousness.<sup>194</sup> It is an attempt to quell the power and effectiveness of the white gaze and achieve true self-consciousness.

As a result, black bodies suffer psychological and physical trauma. The white gaze functions as the power apparatus and the collective consciousness of the white, American society. Through the white gaze, bodies are seen as dangerous, hyper-sexual, and immoral because they do not measure up to idealized standards of whiteness, created through colonialism. These ideals of whiteness and normality have been supported and broadcast throughout society by the development of racialized stereotypes, human and natural sciences, laws, and extra-legal traditions which function to keep black bodies restricted, as discussed in the first chapter. Under the weight of this oppression, black bodies are seen as grotesque and resistant to pain in American society.

George Yancy argues once black people internalize oppressive stereotypes and images of black bodies, it becomes imbedded in one's psyche; it becomes difficult to

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<sup>194</sup> Featherstone, *Body Modification*, 5.

understand the true nature and effects of oppression. The work of religion for African Americans whose bodies are polarized by the white gaze is to fight an epic battle over how their bodies are defined and to resist the internalization of the white gaze, including its racialized discourses and attitudes. In this way, the body is the site where religion occurs.<sup>195</sup> In many ways, the internalization of white gaze functions somewhat like a hostile, judgmental deity or at least a hostile superego.

Carl Jung's formulation of the psyche brings insight to how the white gaze may function once it is internalized into the unconscious of black Americans. For Jung, the unconscious contains two elements, the personal unconscious and the collective conscious. The personal conscious, on one hand, contains all of the painful ideas that are repressed or pushed to the back of the mind away from consciousness, lost memories, subliminal perceptions, ideas that are too traumatic for the conscious, and automated sensory perceptions which I refer to in the first chapter, as emotions.<sup>196</sup> These things, contained in the personal consciousness, are derived from the body's personal experiences in the world.<sup>197</sup> The collective conscious, on the other hand, is made up of ideas that are common among "all men" and lack any attachment to personal experience.<sup>198</sup> Jung includes dreams and fantasies in the realm of the collective unconscious along with the beginning of religion and/or spirituality along with primordial

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<sup>195</sup> George Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes: The Continuing Significance of Race* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008), xviii.

<sup>196</sup> C. G. Jung, *Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, trans. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed. edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), 66.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

images such as gods and angels.<sup>199</sup> When people become aware of what is contained into the unconscious, they attempt to assimilate the unconscious into their consciousness. According to Jung, several effects are possible. First, if a person attempts to include the collective consciousness into the psyche, they begin to feel a sense of inferiority, because their ego cannot stand up to the standards and ideals of the collective unconscious.<sup>200</sup> The second response to the collective unconscious is repressing the collective unconscious, which leads to the development of the personality. Personality, for Jung, is the way that a person marks his/herself away from the collective. He compares it to a mask in more primitive societies. He argues that the mask, usually used in totem ceremonies, is a means of changing or enhancing one's personality. The mask and the mask ritual function as a compromise. It is a way for the individual to stand out, and at the same time, remain part of the community. These rituals also come along with a certain amount of personal prestige, which remains an important factor in societies today.<sup>201</sup> Individuality may be read as either positive or negative to a community. How it is read, depends upon the society and its rules, traditions, and customs. These factors are not static and may change over time.<sup>202</sup>

Because the white gaze is part of white collective consciousness, it cannot be summed up simply as the culmination of individual white people's opinions about the characteristics, qualities, and abilities of black people. The impact and the function of the

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 66–67.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 150–51.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 153.

white gaze is greater than the sum of its parts. It feels like a collective, compacted into a singular, transcendent, extra-human force — one that is omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent. These qualities, which are usually reserved for gods, have real impact on the lives of black bodies. Because it is an apparatus of disciplinary power, the white gaze readily judges black life, determines its value, and chooses whether to allow it to live. It determines whether it continues to exist, where it can exist, and how it can move through time and space.

Building upon object relations theory, Ana-Marie Rizzuto argues that parents are only one factor in the creation of god ideals. She argues that god ideals develop over time during multiple stages of psychic development. For Rizzuto, other factors include social environment and religious background. In this sense, religion is our ability, as humans, to create nonviable but meaning realities capable of expressing our potential for imaginative expansion beyond the boundaries of our bodies.<sup>203</sup> Fanon, explains this a little more clearly for our purposes, he argues that although we begin to develop our sense of id and ego in the context of the nuclear family, during adolescence and adulthood, the society begins to take on the role of the nuclear family in mental and psyche development. That is, just like your mother and father developed rules of discipline and punishment in your childhood, the society ultimately takes on the role as you leave your family while growing into adulthood.<sup>204</sup> Society, in a sense, becomes your new parent and its laws become his discipline. Society is then internalized into the

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<sup>203</sup> Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*, New edition edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1981), 47.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

super ego, disciplining your mind. To be clear, society is not the whole of the superego, but it does make up a part of it, harshly judging the ego. If you are black in a white society, this superego is experienced as the white gaze from above, like a deity, which restricts you psychologically. As former gang member and current activist, Kumasi Simmons, Sr., states, “Each day, I’m feed a spoonful of hatred...it’s only a matter of time before I explode...Do I explode on myself or do I explode on the one whom I perceive as the cause of my condition?”<sup>205</sup> From the earliest gazes and touches from our mother and our father, our experience tells us that we are valued, we are loved, and we are beautiful creations. However, when society takes over the role of families and we are shaped differently by the quality of our relationships with others. If every day, one is told that he or she is not wanted, not valued, and not loved, they will act out in ways to “earn” the other’s desire. This is a mission that will ultimately fail. In our black bodies are always at risk of being strained by the white gaze.

The white gaze is so weighty because it feels like a god is watching and judging. This is important because the white gaze, a mechanism of disciplinary power is always judging, always observing, always classifying, and always judging the value of bodies in comparison to the white ideals. Heinz Kohut’s may argue that this it is a result of what he calls primary narcissism. For him, and other prominent theorists in psychoanalysis and object relations theory such as Freud and Winnicott, primary narcissism is established in the infant stage of development, when the child views the mother and his/herself as united as one. In this stage, the child believes that it has complete control

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<sup>205</sup> Peralta, *Crips and Bloods*.

of the parent's body as if it was his/her own body. This explains why infants often feel free to grab and pull on the mother's body at any given point, or why an infant may reach for the mother's breast to feed even at inconvenient or inappropriate times. The parent is also ascribed qualities of omniscience and omnipresence.<sup>206</sup> The child cannot tell that there is a separation between the mother and the child. As the child realizes that the mother and he/she are separate, or as the child realizes that the mother or parent is not perfect, the child experiences narcissistic disturbances. These disturbances continue throughout life in various intensities. The child deals with narcissistic disturbances through the formulation of an idealized parent imago. In this process, the self develops an ego ideal. This ego ideal is experienced as God.<sup>207</sup>

#### **3.1.4. Body Modification: Making Bodies Over Again**

Body modification may be significant for restoring psychological balance to the body. Body modification is defined as a variety of techniques performed by changing one or more parts of the body from the natural state into a consciously designed state.<sup>208</sup> Practices that alter the body include: piercing, cutting, binding, earlobe stretching, scarification, sub-dermal implants, plastic surgery, tattooing, and branding or burning. It is a way for creating meaning for black people. Body modification brings psychological balance to the those who are warring between self-ideal and discourse that society places

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<sup>206</sup> Heinz Kohut, "Forms and Transitions of Narcissism," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 14, no. 2 (January 1996): 246.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>208</sup> Theresa M. M. Winge, *Body Style* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 6.

on their body, especially for those whose bodies fail to reflect the ideal body of the white gaze. Body modification is a way that people can mark themselves and separate themselves from the collective group and its ideals. It is one method by which one can exercise their subjectivity and take back the body by creating one's own aesthetic ideals and take a stand against the weight of the white gaze.

Some body modification methods deserve further description. Piercing, one of the most common forms of body modification, is performed by impaling the flesh and then adorning the hole with some decorative object, such as metal rings or hoops.<sup>209</sup> The earlobe is the most common body that is pierced. However, many people pierce other parts of the ear, the tongue, the nasal septum, nostrils, the belly button, the breast nipples, and their genitals.<sup>210</sup> Earlobe stretching is a method by which the ear is first pierced and then an insertion is made into the ear. An object, usually a ring, is then inserted into the hole which stretches the hole and the skin around the piercing over time in order to produce larger holes and hanging earlobes.<sup>211</sup> Another form of body modification, cutting, is a method that originated in Africa by which the skin is cut using a sharp object in order to produce keloids, or scar tissue, making various shapes and designs.<sup>212</sup> (See Figure 2.1) The next method, sub-dermal implants is a process by which pieces of metal are inserted through and placed underneath the skin. The skin then heals over the implant

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<sup>209</sup> Lisiunia A. Romanienko, *Body Piercing and Identity Construction: A Comparative Perspective* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 1.

<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Mike Featherstone, ed., *Body Modification* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000), 1.

<sup>212</sup> Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*, 1st edition (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 4.



creating a raised look.<sup>213</sup> (See Figure 2.2) Branding, or burning is performed by heating a piece of metal and then placing the metal, while still hot, on the skin to create carefully designed scarring.<sup>214</sup> (See Figure 2.3)

Body modification can also be extended to include practices that change the outside of the body such as dietary restrictions, exercise regimens, and which are aimed at gaining muscular bulk or reducing body fat in order to create a particular style of aesthetic appearance. These methods include bodybuilding, anorexia, gymnastics, and fasting. They take a longer period of time before the changes to the surface of the body becomes observable as compared to those methods mentioned previously.<sup>215</sup>

In addition, some scholars, such as Mike Featherstone, argue that it is also important to consider was technology may modify bodies. At times, technology is added to the human body in order to enhance its abilities or replace internal organs. An example of this type of technological body modification is a pair of glasses to improve one's vision to an entire technological environment built around the human body such as a jet plane, which allows the human body to travel at speeds and heights not possible and by the human body without the use of technology. These technological devices enable the human body to perform on a motor or sensory level that reaches far beyond the body's natural ability.<sup>216</sup> However, this type of technological body modification is the not the

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<sup>213</sup> Featherstone, *Body Modification*, 1.

<sup>214</sup> Pitts, *In the Flesh*, 4.

<sup>215</sup> Winge, *Body Style*, 6.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 1–2.

focus of this project. I generally classify these types of body modification to the field of technology because they are not permanent, or long term changes to the body itself.



Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2



Figure 2.3

Through body modification techniques, one is able to display emotions and feelings, conscious and unconscious through their skin. Some believe that damaging the skin, through some forms of body modification is a method of self-help whereby people attempt to cope with some form of emotional distress such as anxiety, fear, dehumanization, or rage.<sup>217</sup> Some forms of body modification are seen as self-harming by society (e.g., cutting, anorexia) implying that only certain forms of body modification practices contain a psychological element. In general, those forms of body modification, which are seen as self-harming carry a negative social connotation. People who practice these forms of body modification are seen as disturbed or diseased. They are often treated as mental health problems because it seems irrational for one to inflict pain on one's own body. Other forms of body modification, such as piercing are more accepted by society. Even though these forms are socially accepted, they may still contain a psychological element for the practitioner. Whether society is accepting of the practice is not my concern here, as acceptability varies from society to society and changes with the

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<sup>217</sup> Favazza, *Bodies under Siege*, 129.

time. For example, tattooing was once seen in American society, as a practice that was associated with bikers and criminals. However, this view changed with the tattoo renaissance, the acceptance of tattooing by white, middle-class people who began to take on tribal tattooing.

Body modification is significant in two ways. First, body modification aesthetically modifies the skin. Skin functions as a message center or billboard.<sup>218</sup> The messages may be aimed toward the self or the society. For example, some Modern Primitives argue that body modification rituals and performances allow participants to experience a variety of physical, emotional, and spiritual transcendences. They proudly display their body modifications, and openly share body modification experiences. For them, body modifications are an effort to leave behind the modern trappings of the Western world and to connect with other cultures through body modification practices, especially primitive societies.<sup>219</sup>

By identifying with tribal societies, through body modifications, Modern Primitives use their bodies to protest against Western society, by identifying with societies that are more communal and unfettered by modern social and technological demands. People who are members of the Modern Primitive subculture are often considered “other”, sometimes by choice, and sometimes as result of outsiders misreading their subcultural bodies. Subcultural body style provides opportunities for

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<sup>218</sup> Armando R. Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege: Self-Mutilation, Nonsuicidal Self-Injury, and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry*, third edition edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 129.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

cultural agency, political empowerment, and social recognition for members. Fakir Musafar, the father of the modern primitive movement, argues that body modification is a way to take control of one's body. It is a way to show that you own your own body in the face of god, government, family, religious leaders, businesses, and state institutions.<sup>220</sup>

Second, body modification is significant for black bodies because it provides a ritual for black bodies to participation in the re-creation of the self, an exercise of subjectivity and/or agency. The openness of the grotesque body makes it a pathway for bodily fluids, including semen, to exit the body and enter the world. Bodily fluids are more than just products of the material body. They contain social meaning. Bodily fluids are valued within the social context and are given meaning by people who live within societies. Mary Douglas argues the idea of pollution is related to disorder. What is actually pollution is relative and is only dependent upon individual or cultural opinions. Dirt offends against order. Eliminating pollution is a positive effort to organize one's environment.<sup>221</sup> Douglas' theory about pollution exposes the relationship between social control and autonomy. In many cases, social rules concerning dirt and defilement amount to rules of etiquette and manners.<sup>222</sup> Within oppressive cultural and social contexts, an individual is pressured to control their body, including bodily fluids, grooming, maintenance, and social interaction based on particular rules or controls that society or culture. Robyn Longhurst argues that bodily fluids such as tears, saliva, faces,

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<sup>220</sup> Winge, *Body Style*, 21.

<sup>221</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002), 2.

<sup>222</sup> Kate Cregan, *The Sociology of the Body: Mapping the Abstraction of Embodiment*, 1 edition (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2006), 97.

urine, vomit, sweat, and mucus invoke feeling of disgust in people.<sup>223</sup> However, she notes, all bodily fluids are not met with the same visceral responses. She indicates there is a hierarchy among the bodily fluids. Some fluids are seen as contaminating, while other fluids are viewed as cleansing, or clarifying.<sup>224</sup> This largely depends on the context for which bodily fluids are exposed. For example, blood is often thought of contaminating because of its association with disease. However, in some religious social rituals, such as "becoming blood brothers" or animal sacrifice, blood takes on a clarifying property. In religion, for example, blood is often thought to have special significance, whether the blood is real or symbolic. Take for example, the central ritual in Christianity, communion, or the Eucharist. Participants see themselves drinking the blood of Jesus Christ (symbolically or literally), and this blood has binding, healing, and saving powers. The ritual signifies identification with the Christian community, and the cleansing and forgiveness of one's sins. Blood, in this regard, is a bodily fluid that takes on positive significance in the religion for rituals. It serves to light to both the material body and the mental life.

As the boundary of the physical body, the skin keeps bodily fluids on the inside of the body from spilling out. However, during the practice of most forms of body modification, the fluids of the body such as sweat, blood, tears, etc., begin to leak or spill out into the external world. Since bodily fluids are associated with contamination and/or pollution, the act of intentionally letting bodily fluids through the skin is symbolic of

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<sup>223</sup> Robyn Longhurst, *Bodies: Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, 1 edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 30.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

letting pollution or contamination outside of the body back into the world from which it came. At the very least, the release of fluids through the skin is an attempt to restore equilibrium to the psyche. It represents a form of bloodletting, which functions as a clarifying and cleansing fluid, which purifies the body in the face of the white gaze.

In addition to body modification functioning as a bloodletting ritual, purifying and cleaning the body in the traditional sense, it also challenges idea that black bodies possess excessively thick skin and resist pain. First, the process of tattooing requires that a needle penetrate the skin. The presence of blood and the insertion of ink into the dermis is evidence that the surface of the skin has been penetrated. Further evidence is that many of those who receive tattoos experience pain during the process. As one tattoo artist, Randle, explains:

When they are getting the tattoo, the pain- the physical pain of it -is like a therapy in a way. Because when the tattoo is done, the pain stop, and there you go – beauty. So, it’s like an automatic release of all the stress they were going through. Now they really feel confident that whatever that tattoo was – whatever started the pain –they can build on now.<sup>225</sup>

### **3.1.5. Body Modification and the Psyche**

According to Alessandra Lemma, the way we experience our bodies reflects unconscious introjective and projective processes.<sup>226</sup> She argues, “These early physical and sensory experiences with others are inscribed somatically and lay the foundations for

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<sup>225</sup> Hobbs, interview.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 6.

the development of the body and sense of the self.”<sup>227</sup> The central paradox, for Lemma, is that one is faced with the dilemma of not being able to fulfill the [parent’s] desire, even though the imprint of that [parent’s] desire (or lack of) has been written on the body, internally and externally.<sup>228</sup>

In her research with people who have modified their bodies, she has found three unconscious fantasy’s that are necessary for the psychic equilibrium of those who find body modification really compelling: the reclaiming phantasy, the self-made phantasy, and the perfect match phantasy.<sup>229</sup> In the reclaiming phantasy, modification of one’s body rescues the self from an alien presence felt to reside within the body – that is the parent who will not accept them. This phantasy is concerned with ridding the body of an object, the internalized gaze, felt to be alien or polluting.<sup>230</sup> In the perfect match phantasy, body modification serves the function of creating a perfect ideal body that will guarantee that others, besides the internalized gaze, will love and desire.<sup>231</sup> The self-made phantasy – expresses an envious attack on the object. Here the object’s independence is intolerable and a profound grievance towards the object fuels the envy. The self attempts to create itself, thereby circumventing the internalized parent figure. As a result, the body experiences dependency.<sup>232</sup> According to Lemma, each of these phantasies (there are probably more phantasies) shows how the body serves as both the

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Alessandra Lemma, *Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic Study of Body Modification*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010), 29.

<sup>229</sup> Stacy Peralta, *Crips and Bloods: Made in America* (Docurama, 2009).

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.



content of phantasy and becomes the canvas on which these phantasies are then enacted. If one feels as if something in the external environment has broken into the body, it is experienced as dirty or polluted.<sup>233</sup> This reclaiming fantasy is concerned with expulsion from the body of an object felt to be alien or polluting.<sup>234</sup>

In the second fantasy, perfect match phantasy, body modification serves the function of creating a perfect ideal body that will hopefully secure the other's love and desire.<sup>235</sup> According to Lemma, when one modifies his or her body in hope of getting their love object to approve of their appearance, it functions as a form of physical transvestism and expressed a form of envy.<sup>236</sup> In the perfect match fantasy, the modifier acquires another person's bodily shape and character. It is similar to dressing in someone else's clothing and imitating their gestures and looks. She states, "Imitative identifications of this kind may conceal deep feelings of envy because they are an appropriation of the other through imitation...imitation precedes identification and takes place primarily through vision. Such imitations are fantasies of being or becoming the object through modification of one's own body."<sup>237</sup>

In the self-made phantasy, the body modifier expresses an envious attack on the object. Here the object's independence is intolerable and a profound grievance towards the object fuels the envy. The self retreats into believing that it can create itself, thereby

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<sup>233</sup> Alessandra Lemma, *Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic Study of Body Modification*, 1 edition (London ; New York: Routledge, 2010), 94.

<sup>234</sup> Lemma, *Under the Skin*, 2010, 5.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

circumventing the object, and, therefore, the experience of dependency.<sup>238</sup> Lemma argues that unconscious aim of the self-made phantasy is to eradicate oneself of any trace to the resemblance of the love object. In our case, the love object is the white gaze or white ideals of aesthetic beauty. As Lemmas states:

[T]attooing or any other permanent marks upon the body fulfills the sometimes conscious, but mostly unconscious phantasy of an internal and external change: 'Pain lends the process meaning, while the final "altered" body sustains the illusion that the "old self" has been replaced by a new version'. Most likely the sight of blood and the experience of pain are important components because they provoke awareness of body boundaries and of the self, while it is also the case that pain can be used to promote a feeling of transcendence. For others still, pain is an integral part of a masochistic, eroticized experience in which intrapsychic pain is converted into physical pain that is then defensively sexualized.<sup>239</sup>

The modified body makes the body appear starkly different from white ideals and standards. In these cases, the bodies created through body modification are copies without a reference to an original. In other words, the modification of the body symbolically represents the shift from the old self to a new self, created by the subject and undetermined by the white gaze.<sup>240</sup>

In light of beliefs about the density of black skin and its ability to resist pain, the pain induced by body modification takes on significance for African Americans who

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<sup>238</sup> Lemma, *Under the Skin*, 2010, 5.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 150.

practice any of its techniques. Although each process may not induce the same amount of pain and each person may have a different pain threshold, the acknowledgement of pain and the endurance of pain is meaningful for African American, especially since they are not supposed to feel physical pain at all. Black bodies do feel pain. According to Elaine Scarry, there is a link between pain and imagination. Scarry argues, that pain consistently destroys language. Evidence of this is that people find it difficult to describe their pain. When they attempt to describe it, often the only audible sounds are grunts and cringes. This is because pain brings people to a point of ineffability, where one cannot express the experience of pain in language.<sup>241</sup> According to Scarry, part of the inability to describe pain in language is because pain generally does not have a referent outside the human body.<sup>242</sup> However, pain is different in the sense you do not experience pain "of" or "for" anything. In this way, physical pain is exceptional. Because it has no referent in the material world, Scarry proposes that imagination is the intentional object of pain.<sup>243</sup> It is through imagination that one can transfer the experience of pain and the feelings of helplessness into an experience of self-transformation and creativity. Scarry attributes the creation of art, culture, and dreams to imagination. The transformation occurs when one takes the fictional objects they imagine and begin to fashion that imaginary object

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<sup>241</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 4.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 162.

into real object in the material world. Objects such as art and culture, then, are products of the human body.<sup>244</sup>

Scarry's discussion of pain is limited to physical pain. She makes a distinction between physical pain and psychological suffering. While she acknowledges that psychological suffering does exist, she argues that, unlike psychical pain, psychological suffering has an external referent and does not necessarily destroy language in the same way as physical pain. It has verbal content. However, I disagree with Scarry on this point because one is not always able to express the referent of psychological pain. The experience can be so traumatic and disturbing that one's mind can suppress it deeply into the unconscious. Also, the language in which one expresses his or her pain is not necessarily verbal. One may express his or her psychological in the form of art, or dreams, for example. Body modification, like art, is a form of creative self-expression that is not necessarily verbal.

In addition to pain being a source of creativity, pain is key in helping people create the self. In addition to pain being a physical and biological reality, pain is constructed socially. For example, if you experience pain in your body, you will most likely seek medical treatment. In the process of the doctor determining the course of treatment that will reduce or eliminate your pain, the doctor will diagnose your pain and, if possible, name the condition or disease that is causing your pain. The naming of the illness or disease is socially constructed and it is embedded with social meaning and

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 281–84.

power. Pain caused by pneumonia has a different social stigma than pain caused by psoriasis, for example.

The construction of pain, however, is a top-down composition of the social meaning of pain and expresses the meaning of pain dominated by structures of power. According to historian of religion, Ariel Glucklich, there are several bottom-up models of pain that express how the individual creates meaning through the intentional use of pain. They have roots in religious traditions such as asceticism and monasticism and also social traditions like rites of passage.<sup>245</sup> In these traditions, pain is utilized to reduce or eliminate psychological suffering, mainly anxiety, and depression.<sup>246</sup> In other words, pain serves as a balm for the mind. Pain can help construct a person a self and as a member of particular communities.<sup>247</sup> There are ways in which people use pain to discipline their bodies, to reach a transcendent or euphoric state, to relate to and express sympathy or empathy with other people, and express their faithfulness to a deity or community. We will discuss these models of pain in more detail in the chapter four.

### 3.1.6. Tattooing in the United States

Over the past few decades, one form of body modification, tattooing, has become part of the cultural mainstream in the United States. In the book, *Body Style*, Theresa

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<sup>245</sup> Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul*, 1 edition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 12.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 6.

Winge argues that the body itself has become a representation of visual and material culture ideology in subculture. When displayed, the subcultural body is a visual celebration of the body; its modifications and supplements; its movements and performances; and its explorations and rituals. By subculture, the author is referring to a group smaller in population than mainstream culture as a whole, and who consciously set themselves apart from the mainstream society through their dress, ideology, music, language, technology, geography, and/or activities.<sup>248</sup> The subcultural body style encompasses more than just the physical body of a subculture member (dress, adornment, exterior, presentation, etc.), extending the ways the subcultural body is presented, displayed, disguised, and celebrated inside and outside the subculture.

In order to explore her argument, Winge turns to the white, middle-classed subcultural group that identify themselves as Modern Primitives. The Modern Primitives argue that body modification rituals and performances allow participants to experience a variety of physical, emotional, and spiritual transcendences. They proudly display their body modifications, and openly share body modification experiences. For them, body modification is an effort to leave behind the modern trappings of the Western world and to connect with other cultures through body modification practices, especially primitive societies.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>248</sup> Winge, *Body Style*, 5.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 25–26.

By identifying with tribal African and Polynesian societies, through body modifications, the Modern Primitive is protesting against Western society, and creating an alternative identity. Subcultural body style provides opportunities for cultural agency, political empowerment, and social recognition for members. By examining sociopolitical and sociocultural aspects of subcultural body style, there is potential to reveal the position of the subcultural body within its parent culture and dominant norms, and further establish its role and status within subculture.<sup>250</sup> Winge explains how Modern Primitives utilize body modification in order to take a stand against Western society and how they create identities, self and group, through those modifications. However, she does not seem to see the Modern Primitive movement as a religious one.

Another scholar who discusses tattooing and identity is Margo DeMello in *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo*. She argues that since its arrival in the United States, the social acceptability of tattoos has shifted back and forth between the upper and lower classes.<sup>251</sup> Along with these shifts in class acceptance, the tattoo has also shifted in meaning. In each stage of its social and class evolution, the tattoo itself has been redefined – (1) once being known as the mark of the primitive; (2) then, a symbol of the explorer; (3) next, a sign of patriotism and a mark of rebellion, and (4) now, it stands for many today, as a sign of status. In the text, DeMello explores the white, middle-class repackaging of the tattoo, a process that highlights the tattoo's

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>251</sup> Margo DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription: A Cultural History of the Modern Tattoo Community*, 1st edition (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2000), 3.

"primitive," exotic roots and at the same time seeks to erase its white, working-class beginnings in this country.<sup>252</sup>

The practice of tattooing was removed from its exotic context and ultimately became a deeply ingrained part of North American working-class life. The origins of this transition can be found in the lifestyles of sailors and what this represented to many working-class men back home: adventure, travel, exotic lands and people, and a free spirit. Sailors and later carnies were the middlemen through which the tattoo was transformed from a mark of primitivism to mark of adventure. Early tattooists, through their enthusiasm for creating homegrown designs and adopting new technology, completed the transformation.<sup>253</sup>

Later, DeMello argues that tattooing was adopted by middle-class whites due to a number of social movements including the self-help, New Age, women's spirituality, men's movements, and ecology movements that became popular during the seventies and eighties. During this period, many in the United States began to turn inward and much of the social activism of the earlier period shifted toward an emphasis on personal transformation. According to many observers, this was a moment of profound importance. It was a revolution of human consciousness that affected how people thought about relationships, religion, work, education, and the self. Tattooing began, for

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 49.



the first time, to be connected with emerging issue like self-actualization, social and personal transformation, ecological awareness, and spiritual growth.<sup>254</sup>

While both Winge and DeMello both provide much insight on the historical, religious, and social aspects of tattooing, they limit their discussion to the use of tattooing by the predominately white working class and middle classes. The history that they provide excludes African Americans. I suspect that this exclusion is partially because the popularity of African Americans wearing tattoos began around the late 1980s or early 1990s. Regardless of this possibility, neither author made reference to African Americans when they discuss subculture or Modern Primitives.

Since the introduction of tattooing to the Western world, during the first European encounters with Pacific island cultures, religion and tattooing have been strongly related. Tattooing was used by the Polynesians to protect (like an amulet) them from the dangers, fear, and anxiety that caused by natural disasters, and animals. However, after the Polynesians adopted Western weapons, they no longer needed their tattoos for protection.<sup>255</sup>

Today, the relationship between tattooing and religion may be seen, more easily, through spiritual and social movements including self-help, New Age, women's spirituality, men's, and ecology movements. In the seventies and eighties, there was a turning inward among many in the United States – a move toward radical individualism. Much of the social activism as seen in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power

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<sup>254</sup> Winge, *Body Style*, 143.

<sup>255</sup> DeMello, *Bodies of Inscription*, 46.

Movement shifted toward an emphasis on personal transformation. Tattooing began to be associated with emerging issue like self-actualization, social and personal transformation, ecological awareness, and spiritual growth.<sup>256</sup> Many people see their body as a temple, and tattoos are used as a way of decorating that temple.<sup>257</sup>

Perhaps the most obvious example of an attempt at institutionalizing the body modification, including tattooing, during this New Age spirituality movement is the Church of Body Modification. The Church of Body Modification was established in 1999, and by 2011, claimed approximately 3,500 practicing members. Members of the church engage in ritual practices of both ancient and modern body modification including piercing, scarring, tattooing, and suspensions. The church and its members believe practicing these rituals will unify their minds, bodies, and souls, and allow them to connect with a higher power. They also believe body modification helps individuals grow and learn about who they are and what they can do.<sup>258</sup>

In addition to tattooing association with New Age spirituality, people tattoo religious symbols on their bodies. Many Christians who have tattoos have inked crosses, angels, doves, and scripture onto their bodies.<sup>259</sup> When asked why he decided to get a tattoo of a religious symbol, J. R. Cillian Green said that he give a visual representation

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>258</sup> Danielle Gold, "Seeking Religious Validity for Body Piercings and Tattoos: How the Church of Body Modification Should Gain Recognition as a Religion in the Modern Era," *Rutgers Journal of Law and Religion* 13 (October 1, 2011): 4.

<sup>259</sup> Tim Keel, "Tattooed: Body Art Goes Mainstream," *Christian Century* 124, no. 10 (May 15, 2007): 18.

to the ideas, values, and morals that he held dear.<sup>260</sup> For another man, who responded to an online forum, the Trinitarian symbol tattooed on his body is a daily reminder of "the oneness and threeness of God, and how he is always present..."<sup>261</sup>

The practice of tattooing, as a cultural practice appropriated in the African American community, captures internal emotions and feelings, unconscious and conscious embodied responses to the oppressive external environment that restricts black bodies from moving through time and space freely, and prevents these bodies from fully participating in the social and political environment unencumbered.

Attention to tattooing and the body will help us understand how African Americans autonomously present themselves in an embodied manner as a form of resistance to white oppression. Focusing on the subjectivity of the African American and the complex non-essential ways in which they fight harmful modes of oppression, forcing the white gaze to see the black bodies differently and thus, rendering it less powerless – less controlling. In the next chapter, I will discuss tattooing in the African American culture and its relationship with religion.

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 4

# Writing Religion on Black Bodies

In this chapter, I will argue that tattooing in the African American community provides material that is valuable for analyzing religion. Through the reading of tattoos and understanding tattoo narratives, we may better understand a person's morals, ethics, and values. We also can better understand how they utilize their tattoos to express what is meaningful in their lives. Based on my research and the understanding of religion as the quest for complex subjectivity, we see that through tattooing people are looking to express internal urges that are important to them in terms of expressing life meaning.

First, I will begin with a brief historical discussion about tattooing in the African

American culture to understand what is unique about tattooing in the black community.

In this section we will discuss racial barriers in the tattoo industry. In addition, we will

discuss the conditions that allowed for an increase population of black tattoo artists and

black-owned tattoo shops in the United States. Next, we will discuss whether or not there

is a black style of tattooing. As more African Americans started becoming tattoo artists

and receiving tattoos, the industry experienced a shift in the methods and techniques used in tattooing. Finally, we will discuss the function of religion in order to see how tattooing functions in a religious manner. Religion serves two major functions: (1) maintain psychological balance in light of the nature of the world and the condition of the society; and (2) encourage social cohesion.

All of the people I interviewed, tattoo artists and tattooed people, grew up in households that practiced some form of Christianity to some degree. Some people were children of clergy, some Catholic, and the remaining interviewees belong to Protestant denominations – Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal. The vast majority of the artists I interviewed see themselves as non-religious or spiritual. Many of the tattooed people I interviewed who were not artists remain active Christians. Keep in mind, that as I analyze the data and use quotations to explain or illustrated my analysis in this chapter, many of the examples that I use will have Christian language because it is the language or worldview of the persons I interviewed. However, my understanding of religion remains quest for complex subjectivity in my analysis.

#### **4.1.1. Scratching the Surface of Dark Skin**

Jacci Gresham is given credit as the first African American tattoo artist in the United States.<sup>262</sup> She never intended to become a tattoo artist. She fell into the business by accident. Gresham was an architect, who was laid off from General Motors in Detroit, Michigan. In search of more opportunities, she moved to New Orleans. Gresham was

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<sup>262</sup> Artemus Jenkins, *Color Outside the Lines: A Tattoo Documentary*, 2012.

taught how to tattoo by a West-Indian, English man named Ollie. Ollie tattooed in the United Kingdom before immigrating to the United States, where he continued to tattooed in New Orleans.<sup>263</sup> She became interested in tattooing because she felt that male tattoo artists were abusing the women who received tattoos.<sup>264</sup> What Gresham meant by abuse is something akin to sexual harassment. While they were receiving their tattoos, women would have to endure unwarranted flirting and sexual advances by the male tattoo artists. When she began tattooing in the 1970s, the customer base was people who were considered part of subculture, such as bikers, and prostitutes.<sup>265</sup> She found the transition from architecture to tattooing easy, because the tattoo artwork in tattooing the 1970s was very simple. Many of the designs during that time were flash art<sup>266</sup> Flash is predesigned or preexisting tattoos, usually with a historic or cultural significance. They are stock art designs that usually hung near the front entrance of a tattoo parlor. Some examples of flash art are hula girls, flags, and anchors. These designs became popular among members of the military because the designs reminded them of home.<sup>267</sup> When Jacci began tattooing in the 1970s, flash art, not custom designs, were common. The tattoo artist would use carbon paper to copy the design and then transfer the design onto the skin as a guide.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid.

<sup>264</sup> Jacci Gresham, interview by Jason Jeffries, November 23, 2016.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Theresa M. M. Winge, *Body Style* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 53–54.

<sup>268</sup> Gresham, interview.

Jacci attributes the most significant changes in the tattoo industry to education and the popularity of tattoos among athletes. Although she could not date when she first saw a tattoo on an African American body, outside of military service members, she explained that African American entertainers have been getting tattoos for a long time. For example, R&B/soul singer and musician, Aaron Neville, has had tattoos for decades. In her opinion, once black athletes began to frequent the same social circles as entertainers, athletes began to embrace tattoos.<sup>269</sup> Their bodies are viewed and idolized by masses of people through media and performances.

Jacci Gresham learned to tattoo in the 1970s and remained one of the few African American tattoo artists for several decades because of racial barriers within the tattoo industry. Very few white tattoo artists would offer apprenticeships to potential African American tattooists. As a black woman, she was somewhat an anomaly in the tattooing industry. Tattooing had not exploded within the African American community in the 1970s or 1980s. Gresham's tattoo parlor is located in the French Quarter in New Orleans at 1041 North Rampart Street. Much of her client base is non-black and also tourists.

Until the early 1990s, white males dominated the tattoo industry. It was after, what some call, the tattoo renaissance that more black tattoo artists began to enter the field of tattooing. Although their artwork was formidable, they found barriers in entering the industry because tattooing was not necessarily popular amongst the African American

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid.

community.<sup>270</sup> Many of the artist who have been tattooing for more than 15 years, often discuss the difficulty they encountered while trying to break into the tattoo industry. About 70 percent of the people involved in the tattoo industry were associated with biker culture.<sup>271</sup> According to Gresham, this served as a barrier for black people who wanted to become tattoo artists because biker culture historically is closed or unfriendly to outsiders.<sup>272</sup> White artists were hesitant to take on black artists as apprentices. In addition, because most of the clients were white males, they often would not take a black tattooist seriously.<sup>273</sup>

As the demographics began to change in some urban communities in the late 1980s and early 1990s, some established tattoo shops began to take on more black clients and hire black tattoo artists. One such example is West End Tattoo in Atlanta, Georgia. Julia Alphonso started the shop in 1968.<sup>274</sup> At the time, the neighborhood was predominately white and also was the clientele. After the neighborhood began to shift to majority black in the 1990s, Alphonso decided to continue operating. She began to hire several, young, black artists to work in the shop. Her only requirements were that the artist had to be drug free and be able to draw, especially free-hand name tattoos.<sup>275</sup> Initially, the shop's primary tattoos the artists completed were small hearts, roses, peaches, and names. The tattoos generally cost around twenty-five dollars each. In

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<sup>270</sup> Jenkins, *Color Outside the Lines*.

<sup>271</sup> Gresham, interview.

<sup>272</sup> Dave Nichols and Kim Peterson, *The One Percenter Code: How to Be an Outlaw in a World Gone Soft*, Reprint edition (Motorbooks, 2016), 24.

<sup>273</sup> Jenkins, *Color Outside the Lines*.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid.



addition, Alphonso encouraged her artists to use only basic colors such as black, red, and green because these colors showed well on darker skin.<sup>276</sup> As the shop's African American clientele began to grow, Alphonso wondered why African Americans would get tattoos that had no cultural meaning to them. For example, she questioned why a black person would tattoo Chinese words on their body when they did not understand the language or the cultural significance of the saying or proverb.<sup>277</sup> In addition, because they could not read the language, they had no way of knowing whether or not their finished tattoo was spelled or drawn correctly. She began to research symbols and sayings based in African culture and encouraged her clients to consider them as tattoos.<sup>278</sup> Although Alphonso discouraged her artists from experimenting with more artistic and colorful tattoos, a young artist name Tuki Carter rebelled against being limited to small, simple tattoos. He began to creatively mix colors and tattoo more elaborate designs on dark skin with the hopes of producing the kind of artful tattoos that he saw white artists produce in magazines and at tattoo conventions.<sup>279</sup>

Another factor that made it difficult for African American tattooists from entering the professional ranks of tattooing was the idea that many of them were scratchers. The term, scratcher, is a reference to a tattoo artist who does not maintain professional standards concerning sanitation and possesses mediocre skills.<sup>280</sup> Signs that may indicate

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Malcolm Riley, interview by Jason Jeffries, July 20, 2016; Jenkins, *Color Outside the Lines*.

a tattoo was given by a scratcher are the straightness and accuracy of the lines in the tattoo outline, how deep the ink was injected into the dermis, whether the skin scars after the tattoo, and whether proper techniques were followed in order to avoid infection of the skin during the healing process.<sup>281</sup> Other clues that indicate whether or not one is a scratcher are whether the artist is careful to avoid skin-to-skin contact with your open wound during the tattooing process and the type of equipment they use.<sup>282</sup> Although scratching is a reference to experience and professionalism, some artists believe that scratcher is a racial slur, only referring to African American tattooist. One artist, whom I refer to as Malcolm, explains:

What's actually crazy is the TV show, 'Black Ink Crew,'...I used to read their comments and people used to say they're a bunch of scratchers. I used to say, what they really want to call them is the n –word.<sup>283</sup>

Because they were unable to secure tattoo apprenticeships in tattoo parlors, many artists began tattooing on their own, in kitchens or garages, in order to teach themselves how to tattoo through trial and error.<sup>284</sup> Several of the people I interviewed have several tattoos given to them by people who learned tattooing in prison with makeshift or homemade tattoo machines.<sup>285</sup> Still, other artists argue that at some point in their career,

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<sup>281</sup> Riley, interview.

<sup>282</sup> Jenkins, *Color Outside the Lines*.

<sup>283</sup> Riley, interview.

<sup>284</sup> Jenkins, *Color Outside the Lines*; Randle Hobbs, interview by Jason Jeffries, June 7, 2016.

<sup>285</sup> Tyrone Davis, interview by Jason Jeffries, August 2, 2016; Allen Thompson, interview by Jason Jeffries, n.d.

every tattoo artist is a scratcher. The question is whether or not one takes his or her craft seriously enough to continue to improve as an artist.<sup>286</sup>

The negative connotation of scratching continues despite the growth of professional African American artists and the increase in black-owned tattoo parlors in urban areas in the United States. In large part, this is due to heavily tattooed celebrities who have tattoos done by scratchers, covering their full body.<sup>287</sup> Part of the reason for this is the cost of tattoos. Many African Americans continue to get tattooed in the kitchens and garages because they simply cannot afford the cost of professional tattoo artists. As Allen, one person I interviewed explained, "I did not have the money to go to a shop. My homeboy could do it, so that's what I did."<sup>288</sup> Jaci Gresham thinks that this condition is changing today. She feels many of the new, talented tattoo artists over the last five years, are beginning to lower the prices of their tattoos in order to attract more clients. In her opinion, they are selling their beautiful artwork for too cheap and diminishing the earning potential of other tattoo artists.<sup>289</sup> However, some of the newer African American artists feel like the shift is necessary. Their goal is to be able to offer high quality, professional, artistic tattoos at an affordable price.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Jenkins, *Color Outside the Lines*.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

<sup>288</sup> Thompson, interview.

<sup>289</sup> Gresham, interview.

<sup>290</sup> Jenkins, *Color Outside the Lines*.

#### 4.1.2. African American Tattoo Style

Since African American tattooing has become more accepted in the mainstream, it is likely that you can find at least one tattoo shop that is either owned and operated by an African American or employs at least one African American tattooists. There are currently black owned tattoo parlors in cities like Atlanta, Houston, Cleveland, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, Chicago, Charlotte and New York.<sup>291</sup> As tattoos on black bodies have become more artistic and more common, it begs to question whether a "black style" exists. In other words, is there a style or technique that is specific to tattooing African American bodies? This issue is under debate and opinions vary surrounding three issues: method, symbolism, and genre.

One myth that looms in the air within the industry, despite the tattooing explosion in the African American community since the early 1990s is that it is difficult to tattoo black skin. This myth is grounded in the belief that there is something genetically different about the skin of African American people that will not allow it to properly display the ink used in tattooing.<sup>292</sup> Many white tattoo artists have felt that tattooing the skin of African Americans is a waste of time because either the ink will not last over time or that the artwork will not exhibit in a flattering manner that does justice to the amount of time and effort put into doing tattoos.<sup>293</sup> When tattooing initially became popular within the African American community, this myth limited the scope and type of tattoos

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<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

that artists were willing to tattoo onto black bodies.<sup>294</sup> This belief by tattoo artists is a variant of racial myths about black bodies having thicker skin (as I have discussed earlier in chapter three).

"Nathan," a manager of a black-owned tattoo shop, expressed the myth that black skin does not take color is racist. He claims that the reason behind this myth is white tattoo artists traditionally only used primary colors when tattooing white clients. Once black clients began to come to them for tattoos, they attempted to use the same colors and techniques they used on white skin to tattoo their black client and the lack of adjustments led to many tattoos that are difficult to see after they healed. Nathan argues that many white tattoo artists never attempted to adjust their methods to make a suitable tattoo on a darker canvas.<sup>295</sup>

The solution to the problem may be what people in the industry refer to as the "black style" of tattooing. The expansion in the color palette of inks used in tattooing and the ability of tattooists to mix colors allows for artists to create tattoos that will display beautifully on darker skin.<sup>296</sup> One tattoo artist who works in a small, independent studio, "Sam Jones," concurs. Sam, who has a multi-cultural clientele, explained that there are several factors when considering the approach you take when you are about to tattoo into skin, including the location and position of the tattoo on the body, the complexion of the skin, the density of the skin, and the pain tolerance of the client. He

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid.

<sup>295</sup> Nathan Williams, interview by Jason Jeffries, June 29, 2016.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

continued that in all art, you have to consider the canvas and adjust your composition so that the art will be visible from a particular distance. With darker skin, you just have more contrast in the artwork so that it is visible from a farther distance.<sup>297</sup> In addition to paying attention to contrast on darker skin, many tattoo artists prefer to tattoo larger pieces, compose larger images, focus of significant detail and use fewer lines in the creation of the tattoo.<sup>298</sup> This method has been quickly recognized by non-black artists and utilized on all ethnic groups, including whites. In fact, one white tattooist, Brandon Bond, admitted that he learned the style that he is known for in the tattoo industry by working in a black owned shop with black tattooists, tattooing black skin. He says:

By the way, it's a lot of what you see in our style that we do on white folks. I got that from tattooing black people. So, a lot of the stuff I'm known for, which is our style of work is over-exaggerated imagery, zoomed in, hyper focused and simplified with gigantic loads of contrast. Where the fuck did I came up with that from? I came up with that from tattooing black skin. So when you apply that back to white skin, imagine what happens! It's fucking brilliant! It screams like - it will blind children from across the parking lot.<sup>299</sup>

However, this "new" style of tattooing only gained recognition when it was applied to white skin. Nathan complained that "Black artists have mastered color on dark skin and white artists are attempting to steal the knowledge and steal black clients."<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>297</sup> Sam Jones, interview by Jason Jeffries, June 13, 2016.

<sup>298</sup> Jenkins, *Color Outside the Lines*.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Williams, interview.

Opinions of what a black style of tattooing may be is not limited to the composition of the art inked into dark skin. Some may argue that a black style is based on the types of symbols that are used in tattooing as opposed to composition of the art piece, because every artist must consider the canvas and medium before they consider the composition of the art they are about to produce.<sup>301</sup> Many who take this position would argue that an African American style of tattooing, if one does exist, has to do with the use of African symbols used in the tattoos. Randle, who has been tattooing for about 7 years says that he has recently seen more and more of his clients begin to incorporate Afrocentric themes and symbols into their tattoo designs.<sup>302</sup> Afrocentrism refers to the cultural movement that makes Africa, including Egypt, the Nile Valley civilization, and Nubia, central to African Americans.<sup>303</sup> It may be distinguished from the black power era because Afrocentrism is deeply concerned about the cultural, artistic, and intellectual developments related to Africa more than actual political mobilization.<sup>304</sup> For example, African history is seen as the predecessor of African American history. Because slavery has extinguished the ability for African Americans to know their individual and familial culture or history, the entire continent is accepted as a shared history and culture to be valued and respected. Learning and displaying African history and culture is seen as being conscious of one's true identity, one that begins before and extends beyond slavery

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<sup>301</sup> Jones, interview.

<sup>302</sup> Hobbs, interview.

<sup>303</sup> Algernon Austin, *Achieving Blackness: Race, Black Nationalism, and Afrocentrism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 11.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 112.

and oppression.<sup>305</sup> Some examples of Afrocentric symbols that tattooists have tattooed are Egyptian ankhs, the continent of Africa, the eye of Heru, and Adinkra symbols such as the sankofa bird.<sup>306</sup> In addition to symbols related to African religions and culture, tattoo artists have noticed the use of indigenous animals to African, such as lions, elephants, and rhinoceroses, utilized in their tattoo designs.<sup>307</sup> These symbols are related to identity formation. It is an attempt to identify with a place of origin outside of the institution of slavery. This is significant for African Americans in several ways.

However, scholars have not met Afrocentrism uncritically. Some scholars argue that Afrocentrism is a form of myth creation and pseudoscience.<sup>308</sup> They claim that there are several problems with Afrocentrism. They argue that historical claims by Afrocentrists are fictional, especially claims that Egypt is historically a black nation; Africa is the bedrock of civilization of science and culture;<sup>309</sup> and that Greeks stole their knowledge of science, philosophy, and medicine from Africans and then destroyed African libraries and books.<sup>310</sup> These issues can be debated, but to focus on the veracity of these claims overlooks the function of Afrocentrism for African Americans. Despite controversy, Afrocentrism attempts to connect African Americans with African civilization and cultures, believed to be the superior and more ancient than European

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 113–14.

<sup>306</sup> Tiffany Henderson and April Johnson, interview by Jason Jeffries, June 27, 2016; Jones, interview; Derrick McAfee, interview by Jason Jeffries, June 7, 2016; Williams, interview.

<sup>307</sup> Jones, interview; Hobbs, interview.

<sup>308</sup> Stephen Howe, *Afrocentrism: Mythical Past and Imagined Homes* (London: Verso, 1998), 2.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 38.



advancements in art, science, and philosophy. This belief helps build identity for African Americans who are often considered inferior under the conditions of oppression. In addition, it points to the creation of a new consciousness as discussed in complex subjectivity. The African American with Afrocentric tattoos see themselves in a more authentic relationship with African culture, their African ancestry before enslavement, and a sense of home away from oppressive conditions in the United States. They feel awakened, or “woke” to new and/or different possibilities of being. They perceive themselves in this world (oppression in the United States) but not of this world.

Still, some tattoo artists are not convinced that the use of Afrocentric symbols is necessarily adequate, on its own merits, to warrant a black tattoo style. Those who take this position generally think that there are only two styles of tattooing, realism and cartoon.<sup>311</sup> They are skeptical because symbols do not have stable meaning. For example, Sam argued that since he has been tattooing, he has encountered three black people who have swastikas tattooed on their body.<sup>312</sup> The sight shocked him. Although this symbol is best known in America, today, as a symbol that reminds us both of white racism in American and German racism during the Jewish Holocaust, the swastika has a history that reaches back at least 5000 years. Over time, the symbol has carried various historical meanings. The symbol has been utilized as a sacred symbol in various Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Additionally, the symbol can also

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<sup>311</sup> Hobbs, interview.

<sup>312</sup> Jones, interview.

be found in African cultures (such as the Ashanti and Ghanaian) and thought to represent qualities such as service and dedication.<sup>313</sup>

#### 4.1.3. Religion and Its Function

Before we discuss the ways in which tattoos function similar to religion, we must first answer the questions, what is religion and what is the function of religion. That is what is the purpose of all of the doctrines, rituals, and creeds in the religious institutions that have developed over time? What do these practices accomplish in terms of human bodies? In order to answer this questions, I will first discuss Anthony Pinn's definition of religion. Then, I will turn to the psychology of Sigmund Freud and the sociology of Emile Durkheim to discuss how religion functions within society.

According to Anthony Pinn, at the core of each institutionalized religions, lays an impulse, which he argues is elemental to all religion in its many articulations.<sup>314</sup> By religion, I am not necessarily referring to the doctrines, creeds, rituals, and traditions that have taken on institutional form such as Judaism, Islam, or Christianity.

According to Pinn, there are two dimensions of religion. The first dimension is what he calls "the historical struggle for liberation."<sup>315</sup> It is a wrestling against the way in which, through rituals of reference such as slave auction and lynching, created and

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<sup>313</sup> Claire Polakoff, *Into Indigo: African Textiles and Dyeing Techniques*, 1st edition (Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Books, 1980), 116.

<sup>314</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Fortress Press, 2003), 157.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

reinforced the status of black bodies as objects. Recognition of this status by black people causes a sense of terror and dread.<sup>316</sup> The first dimension of religion manifests itself in institutionalized religion such as Christianity and the Nation of Islam, along with the way they express their push for liberation in socioeconomic and political terms, their aesthetic and ritual dimension in spiritual terms, and their religious thought and theology.<sup>317</sup> However, for Pinn, this is only one part of religion.

The second dimension of religion is what he calls the quest for complex subjectivity.<sup>318</sup> It is the desire, urge, or impulse that undergirds the development of institutionalized religion and its push for liberation. It is much more individual and much more internal than institutionalized religion in its structured form, although the quest may develop into an institutional and/or more communal form. Pinn is clear that the quest for complex subjectivity is not a form of radical individualism and it always happens in the context of a community, which chooses to respond to objectification of the human body in a similar manner.<sup>319</sup>

In order to illustrate the quest for complex subjectivity, Pinn turns to conversion experience. He argues that, driven by the impulse, conversion experience highlights elements of complex subjectivity – elements that are not dependent upon religious institutions. For Pinn, conversion experience contains three elements: (1) confrontation of historical identity, often expressed as some sort of existential pain or suffering; (2) a

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 159.

struggle with "old consciousness," one's historical state as an object and the "possibility of regeneration, or a reconstitution of the soul; and (3) an embrace of "new consciousness" and new modes of behaving within a community.<sup>320</sup> Although Pinn uses William James in his discussion of conversion experience, consciousness for him is not a psychological concept. By consciousness, Pinn utilizes Charles Long, a historian of religions, who describes consciousness as a form of myth creation by which one dislodges the historical relationship by which black bodies were made objects in favor of a new way of being that claims one's original authenticity.<sup>321</sup> It is a dismissal of the master/slave dichotomy in favor for a way of being that is not dependent upon the discourses and mythology of the white gaze.<sup>322</sup>

Although Pinn used Long's definition of consciousness, there is still psychological value derived from new consciousness/myth making through conversion experience. That is creating a self that is both healthy and whole. With a healthy sense of self, one is able to act out of their consciousness and embrace their own agency.<sup>323</sup> They are able to see themselves as something more - as something other than objects of history. This is despite the residues of historical dehumanization may still remain present in the mind. What remains important is that the dehumanization is no longer central to one's idea of self or his/her mode of being in the world after conversion and new consciousness.

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 159–60.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>322</sup> Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, 2nd edition (Aurora, CO: The Davies Group Publishers, 2004), 184.

<sup>323</sup> Pinn, *Terror and Triumph*, 173.

Pinn's definition of religion as a quest for complex subjectivity emphasizes that religion can be manifest in institutionalized and everyday unconventional forms. It reflects the external manifestations of religion in terms of institutions and its doctrines, theologies, and socioeconomic and political actions against objectification. If this is the case, we must begin to look toward rituals and practices outside of religious institutionalized religion in order to understand the nature and meaning of religion, even if these practices seem mundane on the surface. I argue, for some, these practices and rituals may be forms of religion or religious practices.

Pinn's definition establishes how we define religion, however, it would benefit us to discuss further how religion functions. His definition of religions gives us insight to how religion helps us develop a healthy sense of self through consciousness, but his idea of consciousness is a philosophical one and does not explain in depth, how religion works on the psyche, which is part of the body. For more insight on how religion is used psychologically, we will first turn to Freud. Although Sigmund Freud was very critical of religion in general, many of his written works analyzed the way in which religion functioned in the minds of his patients. His handling of religion as a topic resulted in two major works on religion, *The Future of an Illusion* and *Moses and Monotheism*. In the former, Freud argues that religion, along with art and culture, is one of the most important assets developed in civilization. Civilization, he explains, has two essential tasks. The first task is to protect human beings from dangers posed by nature. When humans encounter nature, we realize that we are weak in comparison to the

overwhelming power of nature, or the external world.<sup>324</sup> We also realize that natural phenomena in the world may destroy us at any moment e.g., hurricanes and tsunamis. Under this realization, humans realize they are ultimately frail and death may occur at any moment. The other task is to protect human beings from the suffering they cause each other due to conflicts in competing human desires.<sup>325</sup> Religion, as an asset of civilization, fulfills the same two needs of civilization. One way in which religion works to protect humans from this suffering is to ascribe human qualities to nature. That is, humans give natural phenomena such as the wind and other potentially dangerous natural forces a human quality so that they do not overwhelm humans with fear and anxiety in the face of imminent.<sup>326</sup> One may hear this concept in particular colloquialisms in language. For example, when the wind is blowing past an object in a manner that you can hear the wind, one may say that the wind is "whistling." By humanizing these natural phenomena, one is able to convince themselves that the wind is friendly and non-threatening. In Freud's view, ascribing human qualities to the mighty wind eventually leads to the creation of deities, which also have human qualities.<sup>327</sup> For example, Zeus is the supreme god of the weather in Greek mythology. Deities protect humans from their fear of helplessness in the face of nature, reconcile humans to the cruelty of the world, and compensate them for suffering.

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<sup>324</sup> Sigmund Freud and Peter Gay, *The Future of an Illusion*, ed. James Strachey, The Standard Edition edition (W. W. Norton & Company, 1989), 18–20.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 20–22.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid.

In addition to psychological wholeness for individuals, religion is deeply social. Emile Durkheim argues that religion is something eminently social. Religious rites are social actions which take rise in the midst of assembled groups and which reinforce or recreate certain mental states in these groups. They are social affairs and the product of collective thought.<sup>328</sup> Recognizing the social roots of religion, Durkheim argued that religion ultimately functions as a source of solidarity and identification for the individuals within a society. Religion provided a meaning for life, it provided authority figures, and most importantly for Durkheim, it reinforced the morals and social norms held collectively by all within a society. Durkheim saw religion as a critical part in the social environment. Religion provides social control, cohesion, and purpose for people, as well as another means of communication and gathering for individuals to interact with one another. In other words, religions works to pull people together mentally and physically, in the form of religious services or assemblies. By doing so, religion is able to reaffirm collective morals and beliefs in the minds of all members of society.<sup>329</sup> This is important, because if left to their own for long periods, the beliefs and convictions of individuals will weaken in strength, and require reinforcement. Religion maintains the influence of society - whereas "society" represents the norms and beliefs held in common by a group of individuals.<sup>330</sup>

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<sup>328</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Elementary Forms Of The Religious Life: Newly Translated By Karen E. Fields* (Free Press, 1995), 11–12.

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 181.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 317.

Many of the rituals that are performed by religious institutions can give light to their social nature in general. Most of the ceremonies and rituals, despite their theological system are really about the nature and life of social cohesion within the religious communities. Victor Turner, who combines social anthropology and psychology, argues for the social nature of rituals. Turner cites social anthropology's strength in its ability to categorize symbols, as seen in the category, "dominant symbol," and establish meaning within a social context with regard to the symbol. Turner says, "Rituals reveal values at their deepest level...men express in ritual what moves them most, and since the form of expressions is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed."<sup>331</sup> They can stir emotions and prompt followers to respond to the divine. They go beyond our intellectual understanding.

One such religious ritual that serves to create social bonds is communion. Communion is a ritual symbol for the Christian religion. It is a memorial that symbolizes the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. It is believed to be one of the two religious rituals commanded by Jesus Christ, during his life.<sup>332</sup> Some traditions believe that the ritual brings eternal salvation.<sup>333</sup> The ritual links the individual to a Christian community and is one of the distinguishing marks of the Christian church. Regardless of denomination, culture, or tradition, each Christian church will participate in some form of this ritual.

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<sup>331</sup> Victor W. Turner, Roger D. Abrahams, and Alfred Harris, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Reprint edition (New York: Aldine Transaction, 1995), 241.

<sup>332</sup> Jeffrey Gros et al., *The Lord's Supper: Five Views*, ed. Gordon T. Smith (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2008), 96.

<sup>333</sup> Roch A. Kereszty, *Wedding Feast of the Lamb* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2007), 192.



Communion signifies the common unity of faith for all who belong to the Christian church. Only members of the Christian community are welcome to participate in the ceremony. Although the ritual symbolized the death of Christ, communion is ultimately a ritual that creates a sense of social bonding among those who are Christian. The ritual creates a community, one that is not marked by familial relationships, but one that is held together by common beliefs and common practices. Those within the community enjoy a particular social status, and have access to certain responsibilities and rights administered by that particular Christian community.

Much like the function of religion and its rituals, tattooing meets psychological and social needs. In this section I will develop a typology of tattoos and discuss how they valuable material to understand how people create and display what values, morals, and communities are meaningful in their lives. There is a myriad of styles and symbols that are used in tattooing. They are as numerous as the amount of stars in the sky. As the industry grows and as people continue to be imaginative, the number and variation of the signs, symbols, and words used in tattooing with continue to grow. What seems to be consistent, however, is the reason or the function of tattoos that African Americans receive. This typology may not be limited to the African American community, however, my research and analysis is limited to this community. Regardless of the construction of the tattoo, there are essentially six types of tattoos: memorial, totems, ethical, somasesthetic, religious symbols, and transitional objects. While I have attempted to categorize this typology, this may not be an exhaustive list. That is to say, there may be more types or categories in which one could classify tattoos among this community. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and one tattoo may share qualities from

multiple types. Also, another thinker may choose to arrange the types into a different grouping. In organizing the tattoos into types, I hope to analyze both the motivation behind why some people decide to tattoo their bodies and the function of the tattoo.

The first type of tattoo, memorial tattoo, is one that represents a significant moment in the tattooed person's personal history, family history, or community history. The point in time which the tattoo references may be a time of significant loss or mark an important time in the person's development or a moment of tremendous suffering. Although we often think of memorial in terms of loss, a memorial tattoo could also represent something that one desires to commemorate. In this way, the memorial tattoo can be compared to a monument. It becomes a tool for a person to remember something or someone that is influential to them. It is a method to keep them close, although either distance or time may have caused them to be absent from the present time. Whether a person chooses to mark a negative or a positive moment in their lives or the life of the community or culture, a memorial tattoo helps them remember some significant person, place, or event that time has left behind.

In moments of loss and suffering, according to anthropologist Paul Connerton, people create histories of mourning in order to cope with the emotional pain of loss.<sup>334</sup> First, suffering may appear in the form of historical catastrophe, such as an event such as the bombing of a city or suffering on a mass scale in a historical event like the Holocaust. These events cause people to ask questions of identity and cause people to invent customs

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<sup>334</sup> Paul Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning: History, Memory and the Body*, 1 edition (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 16.

in order to make sense of such catastrophes.<sup>335</sup> The second type of suffering, says Connerton is more routine and usually effects poor and oppressed populations. More elite populations are usually shielded from this type of suffering. For example, the suffering that results because of high unemployment rates will effect poor, uneducated, working class populations, which white collar workers are less likely to experience the same amount of suffering.<sup>336</sup> The suffering is the result of "experience of deprivation, of exploitation, of degradation, of oppression."<sup>337</sup> Connerton concedes, that these two types of suffering are not always easy to distinguish.<sup>338</sup>

African Americans have experienced both forms of suffering in the United States. The experience of Atlantic slave trade and the subsequent chattel slavery is a type of catastrophic, historical suffering. It has caused many to wrestle with questions of identity for many African American people and made them develop histories of mourning. For example, many African Americans assume their cultural roots are from Africa, but because of the nature of the slave trade, many do not know from which country or region of Africa their ancestors were taken. In other words, they cannot identify the true culture of their ancestry. They often view Africa as one, united whole instead of a continent of countries and nations with varying and diverse cultures.

In addition, the subsequent suffering under Reconstruction, civil rights, black power and beyond, falls into the category of more routinized suffering. Connerton

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 16–17.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ibid.

discusses how communities develop histories of mourning for catastrophic events. His examples start with the individual, but once the history is adopted, it develops into a collective ritual shared by communities who experience similar types of suffering. For example, he discussed the history of the AIDS quilt, which was developed initially as a way for one person to express the suffering and loss by someone who wanted to remember they loved one who died during the AIDS epidemic from the disease. The ritual grew into a nation wide memorial that reached the nation's capital, shared by strangers.<sup>339</sup> However, the loss that is caused from being in a depraved environment can result in close proximity to violence, economic depression, high incidents of crime, subpar education, and a myriad of other forms of suffering. Under these conditions, shared histories of mourning could be limited to individuals or even smaller collectives. Tattooing may provide such history of memory creation.

I interviewed a woman named “Monica,” who shared with me the significance of one of her tattoos. It was a memorial tattoo dedicated to the deceased father of her daughter who was tragically died in an incident of gun violence. In her words, "He died taking a bullet for his brother."<sup>340</sup> While her loss was not a catastrophic event in the sense that it created a history of mourning on a national level, it is still a history of mourning, one that is important to Monica, her child, and their family. To memorialize the memory of her loved one, she decided to get a tattoo.<sup>341</sup> The tattoo may be described

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 14–15.

<sup>340</sup> Monica Hampton, interview by Jason Jeffries, August 3, 2016.

<sup>341</sup> Connerton, *The Spirit of Mourning*, 16–17.

as a blue smurf <sup>342</sup> with angel wings flying in the clouds. Underneath the image of the smurf, there was a scroll had a variation of the biblical scripture, John 15:13 written on it. It read "Greater love no one has than this: that he lay down his life for his friends." <sup>343</sup> The scripture and the tattoo helped her remember her loved one and deal with his loss. The tattoo, in this regard, functions as both a public and private memorial. She explained:

I didn't want to forget the man I loved so much and had a child with. As time goes on, I don't think about him every day. But, sometimes, a person will walk up to me and ask me about my tattoo. When I tell them the story behind it, I am remembering him.<sup>344</sup>

Although he died tragically, through an act of violence, the tattoo was a reminder of his character and a testament to her continued faith in spite of her loss. In the history of mourning, this man was both loving and valiant because he literally sacrificed his life in the interest of saving the life of his brother. I am not certain whether this history is true or if she was a witness to the event. However, this is the narrative that she lives with and will pass on to her daughter when she wants to learn about the character of her father.

In addition to becoming a personal reminder and a public testimony, helping her cope with the loss of her child's father, the tattooing process was a shared ritual to help

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<sup>342</sup> A smurf is a fictional, miniature, blue human-like creature that lives in the forrest in Europe; see: Rena C. Winters, *Smurfs: The Inside Story Of The Little Blue Characters* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2011), 8.

<sup>343</sup> Hampton, interview.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid.

memorialize the loss of this man for his family. Monica explained that his entire family was there with her when she received her tattoo. Also, each of his family members received some variation of a tattoo that included a smurf in the design. When I questioned her about the significance of the smurf, she informed me that “Smurf” was the nickname given to him by his family when he was a child.<sup>345</sup>

Monica’s memorial tattoo is an example of how a tattoo can both create ties with a particular community and bring about psychological balance to a person in mourning. Through the tattoo, she remembers a person who was significant in her personal and familial life. Like institutionalized forms of religion memorialize significant moments in time, places, and people in the life of the religious community, memorial tattoos, also, may accomplish the same purpose for individuals, their families and their communities.

The second type of tattoo is the totem tattoo. A totem tattoo appears in the form of an animal or plant (sometimes a mythical or animated creature). The animal totem functions as a personal emblem, similar to a mascot on a sports team. The totem does not represent the animal or plant in itself. For, example it would not represent a live tiger. However, it points to the perceived qualities and characteristics that the person attributes to the animal. It points to emotions, characteristics, or shared qualities that the tattooed person feels accurately represents their personality or represents some social collective in which they belong. The totem is important because it represents some idea that the tattooed person seeks to represent. The qualities and characteristics of the totem are

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

transferred to the personality of the individual and that spirit may be spread to others in close communal relationships. That is to say, the person with the totem tattoo represents the spirit of the totem.

In some cases, the spirit may be contagious in that those who are in close social or familial relationship may also take on the spirit of the totem.<sup>346</sup> For example, if a person takes on the qualities of a totem that represents the qualities of honesty and bravery, they may emphasize these principles while raising their children. As a result, the children may also take on those qualities in high regard and those feelings may be invoked as they gaze upon the totem. Durkheim argues that the transfer of feeling of a totem occur because our ideas and feelings about the totem is deeply connected in our minds. The more simple and concrete a totem is, the more likely its ability to invoke strong feelings and emotions. The totem becomes something special, sacred, almost worshiped.<sup>347</sup>

I met with Nicole, who leads an organization that works with young girls. In our interview, she shared the narratives behind both of her tattoos. When she began to tell me the tattoo narratives behind both of her tattoos, she revealed her first tattoo was a leopard. She initially stated that the leopard had no significant meaning for her and that she received it only because she thought leopards were cute. Later, in the interview, I asked whether her tattoos reflected her personality and she enthusiastically responded:

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<sup>346</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms Of The Religious Life*, 165.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

Oh, yeah. No one was shocked I had a leopard on my back. No one was shocked that I had a cheetah or leopard on my back, because - again, you walk in here and you see the same thing, still. My house is just like that. In college, it was probably even worse. I've toned it down a little bit as I've gotten older. [Laughter] When I turned sixteen, all of the accessories in my car were leopard print. I wanted the leopard print comforter. My shower curtain was leopard. I would definitely say that part of it represents who I am.<sup>348</sup>

As she was speaking, I looked around and noticed her entire workspace was decorated with leopard spots. There were leopard spots painted on the entire wall from floor to the top of the 20-foot ceiling. I also noticed that some of the clothing that was hanging on a rack near us was made with leopard print. So, I questioned her again about the significance of the leopard, challenging the idea that it was just “cute,” this time pointing out that we were literally surrounded by leopard symbolism. Still convinced that she was only attracted to the aesthetic beauty of leopards, she answered that it was simply the print, however, she pointed out that she generally asks for leopard print when getting her nails done.

If there is something with this leopard, its deep down and unintentional...if someone asks me which animal best represents me, I would have to say the leopard just because I ran track. I was fast. You know? Fierce - It's not something that I normally - I'm very independent and have been. I don't rely on anyone else to get me through. Sometimes, I'm a control freak for that reason, because I have a problem delegating. I've never been a follower. If there was going to be a pack, I was more of the leader. I was never the girl, if I got caught up in a situation, explaining

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<sup>348</sup> Adams, interview.



how I got there. If I got there, I got there because I made the choice...it probably represents who I am and my personality - which is why I related to it. That may be why I connect to it.<sup>349</sup>

In spite of her surface explanation of her attraction to the leopard, the characteristics she described were characteristics shared by both she and the leopard. In addition, she made the leopard the mascot of her organization, encouraging girls to be fierce and be leaders as they encounter their activities and the world in life. The leopard had become a totem for her and represented leadership, confidence, and fierceness. These qualities and the totem may be passed on to the girls who work with her in this organization.

The ethical tattoo is third type of tattoo I discovered in my research. By ethic, I mean a set or system of behavior by which a person operates as they navigate through the world and among other people. I am not interested in ideas of morality, universal good, or categorical imperatives, as described in Kantian ethics.<sup>350</sup> Categorical imperative basically determines whether an act is immoral if it cannot be made into a universal law for all human beings to follow. The categorical imperative has three rules: a) act only in accordance with the maxim through which you can, at the same time, will that it become a universal law; b) act so that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means; c) every

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 282.

rational being must be understood "as one who must regard himself as giving universal law through all the maxims of his will."<sup>351</sup> This formulation of ethical behavior favors the elite because only the elite is in a position to create laws that determine what is good for the rest of the society. Those who are in positions of power are able to determine what is universally good for all people under their power. Their ethical determinations can be developed into law with society and then enforced over an entire society. For example, if the elite define marriage as a union between a man and a woman and the law enforces this ethical stance, then the state supported benefits may be denied to a same gender loving couple that wishes to live under the privileges of marriage.

What I have in mind is a system of ethics based on personal autonomy. This is the idea that persons are free to find themselves by choosing an ideal that will be the most meaning for them to focus on in their lives. Ethics based on personal autonomy preserves the freedom for people to make develop a moral system based on their personal will within their social, economic, political context, and their community, freely. Even if their ethical actions are illicit, they are free to take the risk and suffer any consequences society may impose on them. The individual is responsible to determine what is good in their hearts to pursue, regardless of social class, gender, or race. James Faubion argues that within Michel Foucault's work on governmentality, he leaves room for a several systems for human actors to "govern themselves." These subjects freely reflect on what

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid., 286.

is best as ethical actors.<sup>352</sup> One may make ethical decisions based on the need to fulfill carnal pleasure and care for the soul, the criteria that is required to live up to the standards of some principle, the amount of discipline or training it takes to become a certain quality of person, or by telos - an end to a means.<sup>353</sup> The subject position in ethical movement is essential because no one is born an ethical actor and must adapt to "fit the styles and sizes available to them."<sup>354</sup> In addition, all ethical options are not available to all person due to the variation in social locations. Therefore, universal positions are impossible to maintain.<sup>355</sup>

An ethical tattoo that represents the principle of person making ethical decisions in the context of becoming an ethical subject is Allen's "death before dishonor" tattoo. Allen is a former gang member who spent a good portion of his life living by the moral code of gang culture, which may be considered illicit or immoral by mainstream society. The tattoo is placed on his left forearm. Allen explained to me that he received his tattoo from an ex-convict who learned to tattoo in the penitentiary. It was created with a homemade tattoo machine. The materials used to build the machine included an ink pen tube and a small, repurposed motor.<sup>356</sup> The tattoo was never finished because the tattoo artist, who began the tattoo, "ended up catching a case and going away...."<sup>357</sup> If Allen would have finished the tattoo at the time, he says that it would include an image of the

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<sup>352</sup> James D. Faubion, *An Anthropology of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 3–4.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid.

<sup>354</sup> Ibid.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

<sup>356</sup> Thompson, interview.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

Grim Reaper in the empty space. For him, the Grim Reaper represented death, or punishment for breaking the ethical code. Allen explained:

Death before dishonor, even now, is just a code that I live by, period. But, at the particular time-at the time that I got it, I was gang affiliated with certain organizations. That was like the code, so to speak. So, everybody was getting it. It was the cool thing to do. I was young, doing a lot of wrong things. Making a lot of ratchet decisions. So I figured, ok well, I am going to show this off. I am going to do to do this...It really kind of applies to something similar to the no snitching type thing. You know, before you be a snitch or before you dishonor, there's a code. If you betray the code, then death will follow...You know the code of the streets are unwritten rules. If you've lived in the streets or had any dealings with the streets, then you know those rules. If you live that live, that's the code. And, if you don't abide by it, there's a price to pay.<sup>358</sup>

Based on the passion in his response, Allen not only seemed to be not only a believer and follower of the ethical code, but also an enforcer of the code. Allen reflected on the new meaning of the tattoo in present time, because he is no longer involved in street and now has a family. The code of the street had not been replaced by commitment to another group, his family, but even with a meaning, it remained an ethical tattoo. It became a representation of his love and commitment to his family. He explained:

I'm not affiliated with the gang life no more and my dealings with the street life are at minimal. So, my loyalty now is to my family and my children. You know, I've had some dealings

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid.

with the streets and guys I thought were so-called loyal. You know? My father told me a long time ago the streets don't love you back...My family is the number one priority in my life and everything I do, now, is for them... I would probably put my children in there, because that's the most important thing.<sup>359</sup>

The fourth category of tattoo I will discuss is the somaesthetic tattoo, one that has no apparent meaning other than beauty, or to enhance appearance. To some degree, all tattoos are somaesthetic in nature. Some would argue that this tattoo has no meaning. They take this position because many people with somaesthetic tattoos often deny that these tattoos have any significance when asked, initially. Some of those with this type of tattoo will argue that they just like the way it (or tattoos) look in general. However, even if the tattoo has no significant meaning on the surface, it has significant social meaning for African Americans who wear them. First, for much of the history in the United States of America, black people have not been able to determine what they do with their own bodies. This reality extends beyond the institution of slavery into religious, economic, social, and familial fields. For example, churches have had regulations and guidelines for how one dresses. These regulations really determine how black bodies are to be dressed and how they ought to behave in order to appear respectable to the larger social public.<sup>360</sup> Many working class persons and school children must wear uniforms daily, stripping away any visible sign of individuality. In this type of social environment, where people

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<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Anthea D. Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World*, 1 edition (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 80.

are not in control of their own bodies, a somaesthetic tattoo is symbol of taking back such control.

Carla worked as a cheerleader for multiple professional sports organizations. The organizations were rigid and had rules in place that restrained the bodies of the women who were part of the organization. The organization determined the appearance of the women's bodies and many of their actions, also. For Carla, the tattoo was symbolic of both the end of her tenure with this organization and the control she regained of her body as a result of her departure. Carla explains:

...I did professional cheerleading for six years. You sign contracts on both teams, telling you, basically, how short or long your hair can be; what color it can be (they can change it at any time); what your nails should look like (your nails always have to be done); what weight you need to be at (whether you're overweight, when you're underweight). Oh, yeah...You signed away your life, in a way...Literally, my last appearance [with this organization] was the day I went and got this tattoo, because I was like, I don't have to cover it up. I don't care! I'm done! I went and chopped my hair off, I went and cut my hair, dyed it whatever color I wanted. I was like, I can do whatever I want...it was a sense of freedom, for six years to be exact, that I did not have...There is a sense of freedom, especially with this tattoo. I'm free.<sup>361</sup>

Second, as I have argued in an earlier chapter, black bodies are seen as grotesque bodies by the white gaze. Because of the reinforcement of this idea through social myths, media, etc., this feeling can be internalized, causing black people to not their own bodies

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<sup>361</sup> Carla Moore, interview by Jason Jeffries, September 30, 2016.

as beautiful. In this way, somaesthetic tattoos become a form of self-care that has both internal and external significance. They are an attempt to make the body more beautiful externally and develop a sense of self-identity. Identity formation is influenced by an individual's experiences and other social factors such as family structure, economic status, education, etc. Self-identity allows one to present oneself in/to the world. An individual's self-identity is intelligible through the aesthetic presentation of the body. One way a person can express their identity, through the body is through aesthetic/social tattoos. The improved external beauty of the body, in return, fosters more satisfaction about their own beauty. Somaesthetic philosopher, Richard Shusterman argues we use our bodies to learn about the world, change the world, and to fashion ourselves.<sup>362</sup> According to him, the pragmatic disciplines of somaesthetics concentrate on bettering methods of changing facts through remaking the body. Throughout history, people have used methods such as dieting, various forms of exercise, massage, yoga, body modification and other techniques to change the body. These activities, although they appear to be highly individualistic on the surface, are pointed at the self and the other. However, even activities, such as bodybuilding seem to be motivated by the desire to please others. Methods of somaesthetics are often representational and experimental, concerned about external appearance of internal experience, respectively.<sup>363</sup> Tattoo artist, Malcolm, explains why many of his clients end up getting multiple tattoos:

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<sup>362</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, 1 edition (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 26–28.

Once you get one, your body doesn't look the same. So, you want one to compliment the other one. Or, you want one to compliment a set of clothing. I noticed this with guys as well as girls. Guys will get a tattoo on their arm first to show off their muscle. Then their arms looks lonely so you've to get one lower. Now, [the other] arm looks empty, so you've got to get one over here. Girls will say, 'I just want to get one on my shoulder.' But then, they will wear a dress and say, 'I wish this tattoo went back here.' Eventually, it will go down their thigh.<sup>364</sup>

Some of his clients are purely motivated by the aesthetic appearance of tattoos and they attempt to make their bodies more beautiful by aesthetic balance to the appearance of their bodies and by using tattoos to accessorize their clothing.

The fifth type of tattoo is the stigmata tattoo. Stigmata refers to a religious symbol tattooed on the body, meant to reflect a person's religious faith, belief or practice. These tattoos are similar to flags or banners in the sense that they are meant to bear witness to a person's personal, religious position. In the Christian tradition, stigmata is a term that refers to the marks or wounds that Jesus Christ received during the crucifixion.<sup>365</sup> In the Roman Empire, tattooing and other forms of permanent marking were used to both embarrass and identify criminals and slaves, publicly. Branding and tattooing was also used in non-Christian religious rites when someone would because a

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<sup>364</sup> Riley, interview.

<sup>365</sup> Jennifer A. Johnson, "Tattoos of the Cross," *Christian History | Learn the History of Christianity & the Church*, accessed March 26, 2017, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/2009/march/tattoos-of-cross.html>.



"slave" to a deity. However, by the fourth century, some Coptic Christians in Africa began tattooing the cross on themselves as a sign that they were slaves of God.<sup>366</sup> Despite some of the negative connotations of the word, stigmata is simply a way can express their religion, spirituality, or beliefs.

Stigmata tattoos are not limited to Christian symbols and may represent multiple religions or religious traditions and philosophies. The most obvious forms of stigmata tattoo are those that represent easily recognizable religious signs and symbols, such as crosses or angels. Symbols or ideas from non-Christian religions, such as Hinduism or Egyptology represent stigmata also. Some examples of non-Christian symbols, which are becoming more popular are ankhs, ohm, mandalas, Adinkra symbols, etc. In addition, stigmata tattoos may represent religious ideas such as heaven and hell, grace, and divine intervention. For example, heaven may be depicted by clouds in a tattoo signifying the perceived location of heaven versus having a clear picture of heaven itself. Shawn explains:

I am not getting tattoos of money or bitches or mob deep. The tattoos I get on my body are what I believe, my faith, or something detrimental to my life...Every day I look at my tattoos, I know I have an angel watching over me...Every morning I get up, I take a shower and I looking at 'In God we Trust.'<sup>367</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> Lee, interview.

For Shawn, his tattoos represent what he believes and what religious values and principles to which he is committed.

Lastly, the sixth type of tattoo that I discuss is the transitional object tattoo. A transitional object tattoo is one that allows a person to control anxiety that is produced between their internal world and their external realities. In W.D. Winnicott's formulation of transitional objects, the mother helps the child through what Winnicott calls the transitional phenomena, the space between the internal realities. In this transitional space, the infant realizes that (1) the infant is not omnipotent and is actually separate from the mother, and (2) that the outside world can cause them harm.<sup>368</sup> At this point, the mother allows for the child to select a transitional object that helps to calm the anxiety and fear caused by the transitional phenomena. The mother and the child agree that this object is not to be tampered with, cleaned, or changed in any way. This allows the child to maintain a particular type of feeling of power.<sup>369</sup> For Winnicott, religion, including images of gods and art, become transitional objects for adults who still experience anxiety caused by the outside world.<sup>370</sup> Thus, transitional objects help one mitigate the fear and anxiety. Transitional objects are tools used to help one become a more integrated self.

As a form of religion or a form of art, some tattoos function as transitional objects for adults who experience struggle and anxiety between the external realities present in

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<sup>368</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, 2 edition (New York: Routledge, 1990), 2, 12.

<sup>369</sup> Winnicott, 5, 13.

<sup>370</sup> Winnicott, 14.

the world and their internal, mental environment. Much like a transitional object such as a blanket many calm a child's anxiety that the dark may production during bedtime,<sup>371</sup> some tattoos remain equally important for adults when they experience anxiety, especially the depressive kind, in their lives.

Take for example, the small tattoos written in script on Monica's wrists. At the end of my interview with her, as I was photographing some of her tattoos, I noticed two small tattoos, one on each of her wrists that we had not discussed. When she put both of wrists together, the tattoos read, "Be not afraid." When I asked her about the tattoos, she began to reluctantly share the story behind them, partially because she was embarrassed and partially because the reason behind the tattoos was extremely personal and private. She said she was doing "stupid stuff." After the loss of her father's daughter, she experienced deep depression and began cutting herself. After she recovered from depression, she tattooed the saying in order to remind herself how far she had come and to also to never allow herself to return to that dark place again. One of the tattoos is placed underneath one of the scars remaining from when she practiced the cutting behavior.

I was just living a life out of control. You do stupid things when your mind is not in the right place and you're not sober. So, yeah, I was like this is going to go right there, in the same spot so I remind myself you don't ever have to be that way. You don't ever have to let it go that far and feel so alone. It's [the cutting] stupid now, but at the time I definitely didn't understand.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Winnicott, 5.

<sup>372</sup> Hampton, interview.

The “Be not afraid” tattoo functions to regulate and create balance between her internal environment and the external world, much like a transitional object as Winnicott explains it. The words inked into her skin, “be not afraid,” whether they represent a scripture from a sacred text, a command from a mother or another love object during infancy, or a quiet whisper from her internal voice, have the power to silence her anxiety and steer her away from depression when she is faced with difficulties from the external world.

Each of these types of tattoos, help create psychological balance and/or point to social solidarity. They connect us to communities, people, and causes that are important in our lives. They function as personal reminders of what we stand for, how we want to live in and navigate through the world, who we love, what we are committed to, and what pain we carry. They help us remember significant moments in our lives, which positively and negatively shape up lives. They express our joys and fears, hopes and dreams, victories and disappointments. Tattoos provide us healing in times of mourning and keep our deceased loved one's name alive. Many of them are symbolic of us taking control of our own bodies. All of these factors are also present in many religions. It is the way we answer important questions about our being. Because of these elements displayed through tattooing, tattoos serve as rich cultural products for to mine for those who are interested in religious thought, religious ethics, and the development of theology.

#### 4.1.4. The Connection Between Religion and Tattooing

There is no consensus on whether or not tattooing itself is religious among people in the tattoo industry. Those who do see tattooing as religious take this position for various reasons. Some who believe that tattooing is religious think it is a form of spirituality.<sup>373</sup> Tattooing for them is a form of therapeutic touch.<sup>374</sup> For them, the body is full of vital energy that flows throughout the body and also from person to person. The tattoo artist functions in the role of a healer and therapist.<sup>375</sup> Tattooists who take this view are very careful to prepare their tattoo studio and themselves for the process of spiritual and psychological healing to begin. Rituals that are used to prepare the tattoo space include burning sage to rid the space of any bad energy in addition to thorough cleaning.<sup>376</sup> In addition, tattoo artists who see their role as a healer, also take care to enter an almost meditative state, hoping to leave their personal problems behind so they avoid transferring bad energy to their clients.<sup>377</sup> In their role, as healer, they take extra care to make sure their art is representative of their client's vision and that they leave the tattoo studio with a piece of art that is both beautiful and meaningful. As tattoo artist, Randle explains:

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<sup>373</sup> Henderson and Johnson, interview.

<sup>374</sup> Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, 1 edition (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 12.

<sup>375</sup> Henderson and Johnson, interview.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Jones, interview.

I'm the healer in a way, because if it's a good tattoo and it's that meaningful...for instance, say some person knew that their momma's favorite color was purple and they loved roses. They know that those were their two favorite things so I'm going to do a collage and bring a design to where if she knew her mom was still living she would go crazy. So, she knew that her mom still lives on with her every day.<sup>378</sup>

Other tattoo artists see themselves similar to the role of a pastor giving pastoral care to others. Those who take this position feel they are helping people who are receiving their tattoos to cope with psychological and physical pain. During the process, they are able to connect to a person's humanity and issue sound moral and ethical advice.<sup>379</sup> Tattoos often mark the experience and the exchange in addition helping them heal from their pain. Sam explains:

The way I see it is I interact with people for a few hours and sometimes several years. I do get to know these people. I've worked on them for a long time and you have no choice but kind of to share or shed light on the situation they are dealing with. It's unhuman to ignore the things that some of these people are going through or the reasons why they are getting their tattoo. So, yes, I do speak to them person to person to help them kind of cope with what they are dealing with. Some people, when they are being tattooed, will talk and some won't talk. It just kind of depends on the level of pain they are in and a lot of circumstances. So, talking to them, for some people, will help them. So, you learn a lot from them and I guess pastors are kind of dealing with the same thing where you're talking to somebody and you're building that relationship with somebody. They're coming to you regularly. That's definitely an instance with me tattooing.

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<sup>378</sup> Hobbs, interview.

<sup>379</sup> Riley, interview.

These people are coming to me regularly. We're having conversations. We're having discussion about life. We're having discussions about what they are going to do in their careers. Even spiritually at times. I've had clients from Iran and they have a Muslim background. And, we'll have conversations about the similarities and different faiths and it causes you to change your perspective on things quite a bit. I share ideas about sharing. To me, I feel like the way we are in America is very desensitized by a lot of things – a lot of acts. I feel like we need to be more person to person. I feel like there are so many social issues and we are ignoring the fact that I am human and you are human. We're just ignoring that. There are things that influence people's life decisions...They might be in a position that causes them to go either this way or... that way... When they come to me, sometimes that is hashed out.<sup>380</sup>

Also, many of the artists believe that institutionalized religion is dying. The beauty of the tattoos produced in tattooing performs a sort of general revelation. That is, the beauty of art witnesses to general revelation of God and teaches moral lessons without the written texts as the primary form of language.<sup>381</sup> When explaining why he thinks tattooing and religion are related, Randle, explains:

It's like the Taj Mahal. That is unexplainable. The man did it with his hands. He built it with his hands. Nobody can explain how he did. No architecture. Nothing! So, basically, the king saw it like a sign from god. How did you do this...These days religion is kind of dying. It's not many believers, it's not many motivators any more, it's not many leaders no more, you know, giving the good teachings to help people grow. So, I feel like I can do that with art. It's probably

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<sup>380</sup> Jones, interview.

<sup>381</sup> Hobbs, interview.

a time and era that we have to do it different then with verbage. You know? Instead of with a book, let me do it with art. So, if I can do something unbelievable, unspeakable and I can get them viewers to look at it, they will automatically think, that's God some type of way. How did he do that? You know, no human can do that. Something had to touch you. So, I believe I can do something so incredible with the art side that I can get them to believe again – believe in something – to look up to something.<sup>382</sup>

Still others who believe that tattooing is religious take the position because the tattoo parlor can be a sacred space for some people. That is, it serves as a space where people can be themselves without worrying about being judged harshly by others in the tattoo community, somewhat like a confession booth at a Catholic church.<sup>383</sup> As one tattoo artist puts it, many of the tattoo artists are atheists or agnostics so many of them are free thinkers. Also, many of them have criminal records and are entrepreneurs. Because they tend to set their own schedules and work for themselves as artists, they often times are not concerned political correctness. He believes that there is a direct connection between the rise of agnostic and atheistic beliefs among the African American community and the popularity of tattooing.<sup>384</sup> Since many tattoo artists function as pop psychologists and therapists, they exchange their beliefs and ideals about religion with their clients.<sup>385</sup> In this way, the tattoo shop become a sacred place for many, who can share their deepest pain and emotional struggles while receiving honest exchange

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid.

<sup>383</sup> Jones, interview.

<sup>384</sup> Ibid.

<sup>385</sup> Riley, interview.



without the pretense and moral code, or judgment of religious institutions.<sup>386</sup> A person is able to be their authentic selves and escape the pressures of the external world.

Malcolm, who has been tattooing for 7 years, explains:

People question religion their whole life...The thing is they have never met people like tattoo artists. In their immediate lives, they are not surrounded by non-believers. So, when they get around one, it interesting. It's therapeutic because it's the moment that they have been waiting for. 'I can't get this out to my mom. I couldn't say I've always questioned this about the Bible. I don't know that many religious Christians who have actually read the Bible...I know a bunch of atheists that have read the Bible. So, the conversation comes up. If their relationship goes bad, they want to talk about it. I'm not saying that everyone who has these conversations ends up being non-religious. It just opens up a form of acceptance through communication...People feel more comfortable here. People can be themselves...You get the real them. People act at church. People act at restaurants. People don't act at home though. They act around company, but not too much...The reason I say sacred is because there is such a comfort. Sacred would sound like a word to be used when we are talking about something holy, but I mean sacred like... a personal way out – a getaway. Like I could be up here and chill all of the time, but I need to be up here when I need to talk to some real people.<sup>387</sup>

Those who take the position that tattooing has no real connection to religion at all are most likely have strong relationships with various churches. Each person who took

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

<sup>387</sup> Ibid.

this position in my research were active participants in worship, come from families with strong religious backgrounds, and have maintained those relationships with their religious communities through adulthood.

However, there seems to be a conflict with the view that there is no connection with tattoos and religion. Most of the people in this group had at least one tattoo that represented their religious faith. Some examples of the tattoos are rosary beads, biblical scripture, angels, heaven, Jesus, hands of God, and crosses. Most of the Christians I interviewed had multiple tattoos, so I questioned whether they felt their tattoos were in conflict with their religious faith. I was aware that tattoos and body modification, in general, is a topic that is often taboo in many Christian communities. There are at least two biblical texts that give the means for many Christians to interpret getting tattoos as an act of sin. The first is text seems to be a direct commandment from God admonishing marking or cutting into the skin. It states, “You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the Lord.”<sup>388</sup> The other text is in the apocalyptic text, Revelation. Some interpret tattooing as marking yourself to show your allegiance to the “beast” that will ultimately bring on an era of pure wickedness. In that era, those with the mark will access to money and trade. The text reads, “Also it causes all, both small and great, both rich and poor, both free and slave, to be marked on the

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<sup>388</sup> Leviticus 19:28 (NRSV)

right hand or the forehead, so that no one can buy or sell who does not have the mark, that is, the name of the beast or the number of its name.”<sup>389</sup>

Each of those I questioned about how they resolved their conflict between these scriptures and their tattoos responded in several ways. Some of them resolved the conflict because they started to get tattoos when they were young, both in age and their spiritual maturity. Once they reached a certain level of spiritual maturity, they stopped getting their tattoos.<sup>390</sup> Others resolve the conflict between the bible and the their tattoos because they see the body as a temple, as a place where God has both created and dwells. One way they honor God is to decorate the temple to honor the glory of God and by expressing their faith through their tattoos. Also, their tattoos serve as a reminder of their Christian ethics when they are faced with decisions that may go against their Christian faith.<sup>391</sup> The final way that some Christians result the conflict is they point to alternative interpretations of those problematic texts. Some take the hermeneutical stance that the Bible was written by humans in a particular social, historical context. That is, the text was written for a particular group of people living in a particular time. What the text meant for them does not necessarily have the same meaning for those who are living today because we live in a different social context.<sup>392</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Revelation 13:16-17 (NRSV)

<sup>390</sup> Davis, interview.

<sup>391</sup> Shawn Lee, interview by Jason Jeffries, October 14, 2016.

<sup>392</sup> Nicole Adams, interview by Jason Jeffries, October 13, 2016.

## Chapter 5

# Tupac's Construction of Exodus

So far, I have argued that black bodies exist in the United States under the condition of (con)strain, the geo-spatial and psychological restraint of the body. Black bodies are restrained because of the white gaze. The gaze is significant for black bodies because it continuously views black bodies with distorted vision, often ascribing and inscribing black bodies with questionable moral character and harmful discourses which lead to the mistreatment, confinement, and destruction of black life. As a result of the condition of (con)strain, black bodies experience psychological trauma specifically a failure in the development of a healthy sense of self. In other words, black people often struggle psychologically because of the internalization of the white gaze.<sup>393</sup> Because of the physical restriction of black bodies and the internalization of the white gaze, African

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<sup>393</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Colonization Of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory Of Oppression*, 1 edition (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2004), 30.

Americans turn to cultural production as a means to create psychic balance and a means to create a healthy sense of self and community because it enables them to express the joy and the pains they experiences in a world that is dominated by white supremacy..<sup>394</sup> One form of cultural production that has become more prominent through the black community is body modification, especially tattooing. Tattooing expresses moral and ethical values, marks important moments, deep sense of self-creation. Because of this tattooing is a rich cultural product to mine for religious thought.

In this chapter, we will continue to discuss the significance of tattooing for African Americans by highlighting the body art of the late Tupac Shakur, one of the first and most heavily tattooed black bodies displayed publically. I will argue that Tupac's tattooed body served as a means by which he created meaning, in the context of white supremacy. Tattooing, for Tupac, was a quest for complex subjectivity, helping him answer and express deep questions and answers about his existence in the context of oppression. For some, who like Tupac, do not have close ties to institutionalized religion, tattooing also serves as a means of meaning making that enables them to navigate through the world on their own terms.

### **5.1.1. Clarifying Religion**

As I argued in the previous chapter, Anthony Pinn's understanding of religion is based on the impulse that pushes toward liberation. The body, then, becomes the center

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<sup>394</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 2010), 28.

of religion and its practices, and neither oppression nor liberation can be experienced without a body. At its very core, religion is the reclaiming of the body. That is, religion is always concerned with the body. Many of the rituals, theologies, and traditions are concerned about how we define our bodies, what we consume into our bodies, how we carry our bodies, and how we groom our bodies in the world and among our communities. Through the use of religion, we inscribe our bodies with discourse that helps us define who we are in the context of the world. It gives us meaning and helps us interpret our place in nature in relation to all of the other living and non-living forms of material on the planet and within the universe.

As Pinn argues, starting with the body is necessary because it is the site of wrestling with historical objectification.<sup>395</sup> Black bodies were dehumanized, historically through rituals of reference, which include ceremonies, such as slave auctions and lynching. Through these rituals, black bodies were reduced to the status of object, were they lost their agency and their freedom to move about the world. For this reason, the body becomes the proper site to begin to investigate the ways that religion, the quest for complex subjectivity, pushes to the freedom that was lost in the rituals of reference.<sup>396</sup> In addition to the historical rituals that Pinn describes, I believe the body continues to experience rituals of reference, which continue to dehumanize black people, although maybe not so obvious. I have mentioned several of the rituals in the first two chapters.

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<sup>395</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Fortress Press, 2003), 142.

<sup>396</sup> Pinn.

Each time a black person is racially profiled and harassed or killed unjustly by a police officer, we are reminded that they do not enjoy full agency or full subjectivity. When black bodies are corralled into ghettos without access to socio-economic opportunities, political involvement, or denied basic access to rights and needs, such as equal justice or unmolested food, it is a reminder that their bodies are restricted to movement and prevented from having total access to civil liberties. These realities also function as rituals of reference and they also dehumanize black bodies. Black people, through, rituals of reference, are reminded of their status as objects for the benefit of white supremacy.

Many of the rituals, theologies, and traditions are concerned about how we define our bodies, what we consume into our bodies, how we carry our bodies, how we groom our bodies in the world, among communities. Religion is concerned about bodies in two ways. First, inscribes on our bodies with discourse that helps us define who we are in the context of the world. It gives us meaning and helps us interpret our place in nature in relation to all of the other living and non-living forms of material on the planet and within the universe. Since the rituals of reference are placed on our bodies, the body is the site where we begin to rearrange our bodies in a manner we can present to ourselves a new way of appearing and being in order to present ourselves in something more than an object to both ourselves and whites.

### **5.1.2. Tupac's Body in (Con)strain**

Since, as Pinn suggests, that religion is a way of presenting the body to the world in new ways, we should begin to look at forms of religion that reside in everyday life,

whether they are theistic or atheistic in pretense. We ought to focus on the second and third aspects of religions as discussed by Pinn, listed previously. That is, we need to focus on embodied rituals and practices that are aesthetic in nature, and religious thought, in terms of theology, for how they may function and speak toward the liberation and a healthy sense of self. For some, tattooing can function as a method of aesthetic myth creation or theological construction – a way to provide the self with an alternative inscription on the body.

Tupac Shakur was deeply aware of the ways in which the white gaze has placed his body in the condition of (con)strain, the physical and psychological limitations on black bodies due to the ideals and power of white supremacy. He was birthed from the womb of Afeni Shakur, a former Black Panther who was imprisoned during much of her pregnancy. She was released from prison about one month before his birth. Although Tupac was born outside of the confines of the prison industrial complex, he was relegated to a life of extreme poverty until he reached popularity as a rap artist and actor. He was raised in New York until he reached adolescence. While in New York, Afeni became a single mother when her husband, Mutulu Shakur was arrested for his involvement in a string of robberies. He worked at a detox hospital in the Bronx, New York, where he would use acupuncture in order to help heroin addicts overcome drug addiction.<sup>397</sup> He was also a Black Panther when was arrested and imprisoned for his alleged involvement

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<sup>397</sup> Tayannah Lee McQuillar and Fred L. Johnson, *Tupac Shakur: The Life and Times of an American Icon*, 1 edition (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2010), 39.



in the spree of bank robberies.<sup>398</sup> Left without her husband, Afeni Shakur struggled financially and became addicted to drugs. Tupac claims that his mother had a difficult time finding and keeping a job because people discovered her Black Panther connections.<sup>399</sup>

After bouncing around between the homes of relatives and homeless shelters, they moved to Baltimore, Maryland for a new start.<sup>400</sup> There, Tupac attended the Baltimore School for the Arts for three years. Before he could finish high school, Tupac dropped out of high school because of their continued poverty. He explained, in an interview with Chuck Phillips of *Rolling Stone Magazine*, that he wanted to attend college, but he did not because of financial hardship, and emotional strain on the family. His family did not have the money available for him to attend a college. In addition, during that same time, his mother had a miscarriage and was dealing with the lost of her unborn child.<sup>401</sup> To make things more complicated, Tupac testifies that the poverty was exasperated because of his mother's moral principles and values, which she developed through her involvement the Black Panthers. She was denied work because of these values and Tupac claimed that he missed out of a lot of opportunities because of their poverty.<sup>402</sup> Before he was eighteen years old, Tupac had already experienced life living alone and

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<sup>398</sup> McQuillar and Johnson, 41.

<sup>399</sup> McQuillar and Johnson, 38–39.

<sup>400</sup> McQuillar and Johnson, 44.

<sup>401</sup> “Tupac Shakur 1993 Rolling Stones Interview With Chuck Phillips FULL UNCUT Rare - YouTube,” accessed March 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

<sup>402</sup> “Tupac Shakur 1993 Rolling Stones Interview With Chuck Phillips FULL UNCUT Rare - YouTube.”

became involved in the streets. He had also worked forty hours per week. Because of this experience, Tupac was critical of school curriculum. He felt that subjects like Spanish and Algebra did not prepare poor children to live in the real world. He suggested that the curriculum should reflect the needs of children in poverty like teaching them how to "double-talk," and teaching them how to hustle for survival.<sup>403</sup> He failed to finish high school because there were no lights in their house when it was time for him to study for final exams. Tupac claimed that he studied in preparation for his final exams outside, in a local park, until night fell. After the sun went down, he attempted to continue studying by candlelight at home. But his efforts failed. In the end, his mother sent him to live with a family friend in California, as a favor, in hopes that he could find a path to a better life outside of the violence of the ghetto and beyond the poverty she experienced.<sup>404</sup> Tupac claims that the only thing he despises about his childhood is the amount of poverty they experienced. He saw poverty as the cause of violence within both the New York and Baltimore ghettos.

In addition to the extreme poverty that he experienced as an adolescent and a teenager, Tupac experienced the way black bodies were limited by the invisible boundaries that keep black bodies and white bodies separate. When Tupac entered certain spaces, he was reminded, quickly, that his body was out of place and did not belong in areas in which black bodies were not welcome. Tupac recalls one instant that

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<sup>403</sup> "Tupac Interview at 17 Years Old, 1988. - YouTube," accessed March 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

<sup>404</sup> "Tupac Shakur 1993 Rolling Stones Interview With Chuck Phillips FULL UNCUT Rare - YouTube."

lead to Oakland police officers to attack him. He was walking across the street at 17<sup>th</sup> Street and Broadway in Oakland. As he continued across the street, headed to a bank, a police officer stopped him and asked him for his identification. When the officer saw the driver's license, he began to harass Tupac about his name saying, "What kind of name is that." In a defensive posture, Tupac told the officer that Tupac was his given name and asked the officer to give him a citation and let him go about his day.<sup>405</sup> During the heated exchange, the officer told Shakur that he needed to learn his place. In response, Tupac quoted the rap group NWA by saying, "Fuck the police!" Subsequently, the officer began to take Tupac to the ground, forcing Tupac's head into the concrete, causing him to lose consciousness. When he awoke, he was handcuffed and charged with resisting arrest.<sup>406</sup> The encounter with police left Tupac with permanent scar under his right eye.<sup>407</sup> The encounter resulted in Tupac filing a lawsuit, which the city of Oakland eventually settled. Tupac felt like his rights were violated and there was no just cause for an officer to check his identification, as if he was living in apartheid South Africa.<sup>408</sup> The reference to the South African form of segregation was a direct comparison to his situation in Oakland,

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<sup>405</sup> "Tupac's Jaywalking Press Conference, November 12, 1991 (HQ) - YouTube," accessed March 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

<sup>406</sup> "2PAC On His Lawsuit against the Oakland Police Department, and the Music Video for TRAPPED - YouTube," accessed March 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/>; "Tupac Shakur 1993 Rolling Stones Interview With Chuck Phillips FULL UNCUT Rare - YouTube"; "Mopreme Shakur Recalls 2pac Getting Beaten by Oakland Police - YouTube," accessed March 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

<sup>407</sup> "DJ Prezence - 2Pac 1992 Interview (BET's Tanya Hart) - YouTube," accessed March 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

<sup>408</sup> "Tupac's Jaywalking Press Conference, November 12, 1991 (HQ) - YouTube."

where he felt also maintained segregated society based on racism, although segregation had ended nearly 30 years prior in America.

Another incident that highlight the invisible lines that kept black and white bodies separate was the premier of "Poetic Justice," a movie in which Tupac co-starred in with Janet Jackson. The movie was being shown near Shakur's home in a suburban neighborhood.<sup>409</sup> Because Tupac was in the movie, the theatre feared that a young, urban crowd would flood the neighborhood and bring violence to the area. As a result of their fear, the theatre decided to delay showing the movie until the following week. The black community criticized the operators of the movie theatre for being racist. Tupac also felt the same way. He argued that he has watched many violent movies at that particular movie theatre over the past year and they never delayed an opening because the movie was violent, therefore, violence was not the issue.<sup>410</sup> The theatre made a false assumption based on his involvement as a rap artist, thinking that the theatre would be flooded with black bodies. The tragedy was that he could not even watch a movie that he starred in at the theatre near his home. The theatre's response to the possibility of a group of black bodies crossing into their space was a reminder that black bodies did not belong

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<sup>409</sup> "Tupac Shakur 1993 Rolling Stones Interview With Chuck Phillips FULL UNCUT Rare - YouTube."

<sup>410</sup> "Tupac Shakur 1993 Rolling Stones Interview With Chuck Phillips FULL UNCUT Rare - YouTube."

there. It was a boundary that they were attempting to maintain by delaying the showing of the movie.<sup>411</sup>

Tupac recognized the way that his body was under surveillance as a black male and how the criminal and hypersexuality discourse attached themselves to his body based on his newfound fame and the conscious message in his music (at least on the first two albums). Tupac claims that he never had a criminal record until he recorded music and gained critical recognition.<sup>412</sup> Tupac felt that “they” wanted it to be that way. He also challenged the interviewer to find a prison psychologist who would explain to him why a person who grew up in poverty and never had a criminal record until age 22, would suddenly take on a life of crime, after finally getting out of poverty.<sup>413</sup> During his fame as an actor and a hip hop artist, Tupac was indicted and arrested for multiple criminal charges, some serious and minor. He maintained his innocence in most cases. One of the charges was an alleged sexual assault, although in the media, the charge was portrayed as rape. Tupac claimed that he was being falsely accused because of his popularity and his wealth.<sup>414</sup> He also became cynical under questioning, saying that if anyone believes he would ever rape a woman, tell them to listen to "Keep Your Head Up," and "Brenda's Got

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<sup>411</sup> “Tupac Shakur 1993 Rolling Stones Interview With Chuck Phillips FULL UNCUT Rare - YouTube.”

<sup>412</sup> “2Pac Interview With Ed Gordon - 1994 - YouTube,” accessed March 7, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/>.

<sup>413</sup> “Tupac Shakur 1993 Rolling Stones Interview With Chuck Phillips FULL UNCUT Rare - YouTube.”

<sup>414</sup> “2Pac Interview With Ed Gordon - 1994 - YouTube.”

a Baby."<sup>415</sup> These were two of his released songs in which Tupac expresses sympathy for the struggle that black women endure under the guise of black patriarchy and male misogyny. Tupac's point was that it would be impossible for a person who had that sort of sensitivity toward women to commit an act against women such as rape or sexual assault. From Tupac's vantage point, law enforcement and media outlets portrayed him as a criminal, even though he had not committed any crime. Since he was a black man who spoke a positive message to uplift black people, and because he spoke against poverty and police brutality, he was being made into a stereotype that did not fit the realities of his life.

### 5.1.3. Tupac, Religion, and Spirituality

Besides his most prominent tattoo stretched across his abdomen which reads "Thug Life," Shakur has at least ten other tattoos, two of which seem to be explicitly religious.<sup>416</sup> One of these tattoos is "Christ in flames and a crown of thorns flashed on his right bicep."<sup>417</sup> The other is what I will refer to as the "Exodus" tattoo.<sup>418</sup> The "Exodus" tattoo is a rather large cross, outlined in black ink covering a significant portion of Shakur's back. The word Exodus is written in script at the axis of the cross and a four-digit number, "1831," is written just below the word "Exodus." Because of Tupac's prominence as a hip-hop, artist, his ambiguous relationship with religious institutions,

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<sup>415</sup> "2Pac Interview With Ed Gordon - 1994 - YouTube."

<sup>416</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, Reprint edition (New York: Civitas Books, 2006), 232.

<sup>417</sup> Dyson.

<sup>418</sup> Dyson.

and his metamorphous into an urban myth, Tupac is a unique figure that has significance for those in religious studies who are attempting to understand how religion functions outside of religious institutions.

According to Michael Eric Dyson, many fans of hip-hop viewed Tupac their prophet because many of the things he said in interviews about and rapped about in songs, including his own death, eventually came true.<sup>419</sup> Tupac's music serves as a sermon for people living in poor, oppressed, urban communities. Tupac believed that poor people did not have the same opportunities to explore spirituality because they had to focus on meeting their basic needs for survival.<sup>420</sup> Because of this, many of his songs were laden with theological themes, designed to make listeners ponder concepts such as God, sin, heaven, and hell. For example, in "Lord Knows," Tupac ponders whether he could be forgiven for the all of the things that he has done a person living the street life:

I wonder if the Lord will forgive me or bury me a G  
 I couldn't let my adversaries worry me  
 And every single day it's a test, wear a bulletproof vest  
 And still a nigga stressin' over death

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<sup>419</sup> Dyson, 4.  
<sup>420</sup> {Citation}

If I could choose when a nigga die, figure I'd  
Take a puff on the blunt, and let my trigga fly<sup>421</sup>

Although Tupac's religious views were unorthodox and often rubbed religious clergy the wrong way, religious themes in his music were designed to mimic or remind listeners of stories in the Bible.<sup>422</sup> According to one of his mentors, Leila Steinberg, Tupac used his spiritual beliefs in his music in hopes of destroying ethnic and national barriers. In an interview with Dyson, Steinberg stated:

He thought that spirituality, as many people explore it, is racially biased. It's a privilege to be able to ponder the great spiritual truths. Because if you are a poor person in the ghetto with no money, how can you expound on life? So [Tupac said] it's very racist to have the luxury of exploring your humanness because when you're in the hood, you don't get to ponder because you're trying to eat. And Pac wanted to open the doors for all of us to be able to have spiritual conversations and to ponder the meaning of life.<sup>423</sup>

Out of recognition of Shakur's prophetic impact and his influence on youth, Reverend Willie Wilson, a Baptist pastor, decided to hold a memorial service in honor of Tupac, shortly after his death. Wilson felt like Tupac and other hip-hop artists are the preachers to the youth. Many youth felt a deep sense of grief and pain because of his

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<sup>421</sup> Tupac Shakur, *Lord Knows*, Audio CD, *Me Against the World* (Atlantic Records, 1995).

<sup>422</sup> Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, 2006, 204.

<sup>423</sup> Dyson, 206.



passing. The memorial service served as a place where these young people could deal with their grief.<sup>424</sup>

Second, after Tupac died, he became a modern, urban myth. Much of this development has to do with the impressive volume of music that Death Row Records and Amaru Records released by Tupac posthumously, including *R U Still Down* (1997), *Until the End of Time* (2001), *Better Dayz* (2002), *Loyal to the Game* (2004), and *Pac's Life* (2006). There have been so many albums released that people began to wonder whether Tupac was still alive. Both the albums and alleged Tupac sightings have led to the belief that Tupac may indeed remain alive, hiding in a foreign country, similar to Assata Shakur, a family friend who became a fugitive when she sought out political refuge in Cuba after allegedly killing a New Jersey police officer. One of Tupac's posthumous albums in 1996 was released under the name Makaveli and titled, *The Don Kiluminati: The 7 Day Theory*. The name change invoked comparisons to Nicolo Machiavelli, the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Italian political thinker who once wrote about faking his own death employed as a war strategy in his book, *The Art of War*, released in 1521. Machiavelli introduced the strategy as a means to secure time to plot against one's enemies. In addition to allusions to Tupac faking his own death, the content of the album, especially references to Jesus and resurrection, further cemented suspicions that Tupac was a

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<sup>424</sup> Dyson, 201.

prophet in the order of Jesus, who would return from the dead in 7 days.<sup>425</sup> Further exasperating the myth that Tupac was alive and hiding in a foreign country is the use of modern technology. In 2010, at the Coachella Valley Music and Art Festival, Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre performed live with a hologram of Tupac.

Thirdly, Tupac's criticism of the church, his belief in a deity, and his theology places him in Fuller's category, spiritual, but not religious. Tupac was unchurched. This is significant because of the growing population of people who embrace spirituality and reject formal, institutionalized religion.<sup>426</sup> According to Robert C. Fuller, there are three types of unchurched people who do not have a formal or regular commitment to the church. The first type is the secular humanist or non-believer, one who totally rejects any supernatural understanding of the world.<sup>427</sup> This group totally relies on science and human reason in order to explain the world and the human condition. This attitude toward religion can be seen in biblical criticism. When modern scientific methods and principles, such as the historical-critical method, are applied to the Bible, it becomes

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<sup>425</sup> Drah Cenedive, *2Pac Lives The Death of Makaveli / The Resurrection of Tupac Amaru*, Re-edited/revised edition (Topeka, KS: Hard Evidence Research Publishing, 2004), 73–93.

<sup>426</sup> 1615 L. Street et al., “‘Nones’ on the Rise,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), October 9, 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>.

<sup>427</sup> Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America*, 1 edition (Oxford : New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2.

difficult for secular humanists to believe the authenticity and verity of biblical claims.<sup>428</sup>

Fuller states:

Many of us have also been introduced to the results of modern biblical scholarship that illuminate the human authorship of the Bible (as opposed to accepting it as divinely revealed). And, too, most educated people are aware of the role that cultural conditioning plays in shaping our beliefs and attitudes. These modern intellectual forces have prompted many to become skeptical of religious doctrines that claim absolute truth.<sup>429</sup>

Although I agree with Fuller's understanding of the secular humanist absconding any supernatural explanations or claim, science and reason are not the only motivation for doubt of supernatural involvement in the world. Black secular humanists, although they do look toward science and human reason, proceed with caution. Skepticism toward science and reason is present in black humanists because of the way science and reason, for example phrenology, have been used to oppress black people. Black secular humanists understand to science and reason is always influenced by social bias.<sup>430</sup>

The second type of unchurched person is the one whose relationship with institutionalized religion is ambiguous. This group includes people who are critical of the

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<sup>428</sup> Fuller, 2–3.

<sup>429</sup> Fuller.

<sup>430</sup> Sikivu Hutchinson, *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Infidel Books, 2011), 201–2.

church, but remain loosely connect to it because of their family background or other social reasons. They attend church during holidays, and important religious ceremonies, however regular church attendance is minimal. Some also attend church out of concern for social status within their communities. This often is in the meantime, before their final break from the religious institution. Fuller, explains:

They might be motivated to continue such marginal connection with a church due to their family background, out of concern with social standing, or simply because they are timid about making a final break from religion.<sup>431</sup>

The third type of unchurched American is the person who maintains no affiliation with a church, but remains concerned about spiritual matters. This group pursues spirituality outside of formal, or traditional religious institutions. They are often referred to as "spiritual, but not religious." These people view their lives as a spiritual journey. For them, their religious practices are not fixed and they expect it to change as they continue on their spiritual path. Their understanding of a deity and understanding of the human condition is usually formulated outside of the confines of mainstream religious institutions. Spiritual, but not religious people account for roughly half of all unchurched peoples in America. People in this group still express a belief in a deity and they are interested in rituals, moral behavior, and other practices, which help them foster their

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<sup>431</sup> Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious*, 3.

relationship with the divine. They usually are critical of institutionalized religion and often express disdain for clergy, often due to personal experience. Members of this group often pull bits and pieces from various philosophies and religions to formulate a highly individualized personal form of spirituality. Their spirituality is often linked to personal growth. Again, their formulation of spiritual rituals and practices is unstable and will most likely change as they continue on their spiritual journey.<sup>432</sup>

Although, Fuller's third category insinuates that spiritual people are not religious, his definition of religion depends heavily on what degree a person associates with religious institutions. In his view, if a person does not participate in the community life and practices of religious institutions, but remain concerned with their spiritual needs, they fall into the category, spiritual but not religious. However, this is a narrow view of what religion means. Even in his description of spiritual, but not religious, Fuller argues that those who fall into this category pull from various religious sources to formulate their own brand of religion. However, I would argue that those who pull from different traditions, even those outside of institutionalized religion and remain concerned about spiritual things are still practicing religion.

Tupac, was unchurched like many spiritual but not religious people who have ambiguous relationships with religious institutions. Although he attended church as a youth with his mother, he was very critical of the church and its clergy. Take for example, his argument for a solution to the problem of poverty in urban communities.

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<sup>432</sup> Fuller, 4–5.

Tupac believed that churches should take the money they collect during offering and give it to the poor so they could have a better life rather than building larger, more beautiful churches. He argued that some of the churches are so large that they occupy an entire city block. However the poor and the homeless are not allowed to sleep there when in need. This was a sign of the church's misdirection. Tupac says:

If churches gave half of the money they was making and gave it back to the community, we'd be alright. If they take half of the buildings they use to praise God and give it to motherfuckers who need God, we'd be alright. Have you seen some of these got damn churches lately? There's ones that take up the whole block in New York. There's homeless people out here. Why ain't God letting them stay there? Why these [folks] got gold ceilings and shit? Why God need gold ceilings to talk to me? Why does God need colored windows to talk to me? Why God can't come where I'm at where he sent me?<sup>433</sup>

However, Tupac still believed in God. In fact, he saw his life and his mission as a part of God's ultimate goal to help and encourage the black and the poor to survive this world. This theological point was reflected in this theology about Black Jesus (Black Jesuz), the patron saint of the thug. This is a different Jesus than Jesus Christ of the Christian gospel. Tupac's Jesuz is a saint that thugs can pray to while they experience the dangers of street life. Black Jesuz is saint that walks with thugs while they hustle and

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<sup>433</sup> Tupac Amaru Shakur Unofficial Channel, *Tupac's "Lost VIBE Interview" (1996)* + *NAPISY PL*, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOidOyw4E1Y>.

in order to survive poverty and feed their families, including illicit activities. He is also a participant in sin. Tupac's Black Jesuz is a reinterpretation of Jesus Christ. While influenced by the Christian Christ, Black Jesuz is theologically constructed from the experience of ghetto life, not the church, and reformulated to meet the needs of people living in oppressed environments, which he calls as an existential hell.<sup>434</sup>

#### **5.1.4. Exodus 18, Verse 31: From Moses to Nat Turner**

In this section, we will examine Tupac Shakur's so-called "Exodus" tattoo so that we may understand how individuals may use tattoos in order to create meaning. It is my contention that scholars of black religious thought, such as Michael Eric Dyson and Linda Tucker, have misinterpreted this tattoo. Both of these scholars believe the tattoo is both a reference to the Biblical exodus and consistent with black liberation theology because of the dominance of Christian discourse within black religious thought. A re-reading of this tattoo will show that it likely points to Nat Turner's insurrection,, not Moses and the "Children of Israel." Nat Turner's insurrection favors human revolution over divine liberation and places more emphasis on the way the material body moves in time and space. Although the "Exodus" tattoo appears to refer to the story of Moses in the Bible, it points to actual historical events within the context of African American history. Revolt is different than the liberation celebrated in the Exodus motif, because it relies on human action and does not guarantee success.

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<sup>434</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, ed., *Noise and Spirit: The Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, First Printing (New York: NYU Press, 2003), 96–97.

The reason for the Biblical understanding of Tupac's "Exodus" tattoo is grounded in the dominance of the liberation motif present in black religious thought. The biblical story of Moses, and the liberation of the people of Israel, serves as a genealogy for African American religious thought that skews the proper reading of Shakur's "Exodus" tattoo. Dyson and Tucker have misread the ink inscribed on the body of Tupac Shakur, assuming that the tattoo refers to the second book in the Bible. The "Exodus" tattoo is even larger than his "Thug Life" tattoo and takes up a significant portion of his upper back. This tattoo was rarely photographed.<sup>435</sup> I was only able to find three distinctly different photographs of the tattoo and only two of the pictures were readable, clearly displaying the words and the numbers on the tattoo. The remaining photograph was taken at an indirect angle, which distorts one's view of the number underneath the word "Exodus," contained within a rather large cross.<sup>436</sup> I believe this factor also contributes to the misreading of the words and meaning of the tattoo, because this angle prohibits one from reading the entire number tattooed on Shakur's "Exodus" tattoo. Michael Eric Dyson, who refers to the ink permanently inscribed on Shakur's back as the "Exodus 18:11" tattoo, artificially inserts a colon in the number in his reading, separating the number into chapter and verse.<sup>437</sup> There is no colon on the actual tattoo. While Dyson does not attempt to analyze the meaning of the tattoo, clearly he thinks it is a reference to

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<sup>435</sup> Linda Tucker, "'Holler If Ya Hear Me': Black Men, (Bad) Raps, and Resistance," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 31, no. 2 (January 1, 2001): 72, <https://doi.org/10.3138/CRAS-s031-02-05>.

<sup>436</sup> See <http://www.2pacworld.co.uk/2pac-media/tupac-picture-gallery-2pac-pics/tupacs-tattoos-meaning/>; <http://2pacinfo.com/tupac/tattoos.shtml>; and <http://media.photobucket.com/image/exodus%201831/leonineqt/146.jpg>

<sup>437</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me* (Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 232.



the Bible. Linda Tucker, in her article, "'Holler If Ya Hear Me': Black Men, (Bad) Raps, and Resistance," also mistakenly reads the Exodus tattoo as a reference to the Bible. Alluding to the ink as the "Exodus 1811" tattoo, she interprets the Bible while explaining the tattoo saying:

The verse Exodus 18:11 is part of an elegy to God for effecting the liberation of the Israelites from slavery. The verse relates how God liberated the Children of Israel by dealing with the Egyptians "in just that matter in which [the Egyptians] were presumptuous against [the Children of Israel]."<sup>438</sup>

By linking Tupac and his tattoo to the Exodus motif, Dyson and Tucker both include him in the Exodus genealogy where liberation in the teleological goal and the freedom to the body is fully determined by a transcendent being.

The Exodus and/or Moses motif that establishes God as divine liberator is embedded in black religious and political thought. Theologian, James Cone, calls the Exodus event the most central story in black theology.<sup>439</sup> The event, for Cone, established that God is involved in human history and that God's revelation cannot be interpreted apart from the political and social plights of the people of Israel in the Bible. According to Cone, through the story of Exodus, one can see that God is interested in the

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<sup>438</sup> Tucker, "'Holler If Ya Hear Me'," 72.

<sup>439</sup> James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Orbis Books, 1997), 58.

protection of the poor and that God is the one who established the rights of the oppressed.<sup>440</sup>

In Cone's view, since God liberated the Hebrew nation from oppression it means that God empathizes with other groups that experience oppression, has identified with them, and actively works for oppressed peoples in order to end their oppression.<sup>441</sup> Since African Americans are oppressed, God must identify with them and work toward their liberation also. In addition, God must be black because of this identification of the suffering of oppressed peoples, especially African Americans.<sup>442</sup> With this interpretation of the Exodus text, black people are usually identified as the Israelites who achieve freedom through God's actions while white people are identified with Egyptians and the Pharaoh who kept them in slavery.

In African American political thought, the Exodus figure has been utilized from post-reconstruction to the civil rights movement.<sup>443</sup> Theophus Smith argues that the use of biblical figures, such as Moses, in political thought is a form of biblical typology. Typology is "a hermeneutic or interpretive tradition in which a person or place, object or event, is connected to a second entity in such a way that the first signifies the second and

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<sup>440</sup> Cone, 57–58.

<sup>441</sup> Cone, 57.

<sup>442</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Orbis Books, 2010), 55–56.

<sup>443</sup> Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America*, Facsimile edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 63.

the second fulfills or encompasses the first.”<sup>444</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. used this typology in his mountaintop speech:

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!<sup>445</sup>

King's words invoked the Biblical Moses, standing at the peak of the mountain when the Israelites roamed the dessert for 40 years after God freed them from the Egyptians by parting the Red Sea and then allowing it to close in on their captors.<sup>446</sup> The reference to Exodus in King's speech connected King to Moses, the person tasked with leading the Israelites to the Promised Land, where they could exist in freedom, without the oversight of their oppressors and where they would prosper, having all of their needs of survival met by the fertility of the land. This use of the Exodus motif also connected the African American community to the people of Israel. Like the Israelites, African

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<sup>444</sup> Smith, 70.

<sup>445</sup> Clayborne Carson, Kris Shepard, and Andrew Young, *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Reprint edition (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2002), 222.

<sup>446</sup> Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 71.

Americans were no longer enslaved, but for King, segregation and oppression left them destitute. They too were roaming in the desert without access to the materials that would allow them to live a prosperous and a political expedient life. Segregation in America was like roaming the desert.

However, there are difficulties in adopting Exodus as the central motif in black religious and theological thought. First, the Exodus story is a story of God's response to oppression for a different people, not African Americans.<sup>447</sup> To automatically assume that God would do for one group the same as God did for the group that the bible designates as “special,” is a false equivalency. Cone explains black history as a norm for his black theology of liberation.<sup>448</sup> If black people in America were to only consider black history in the United States, they could not, in good faith, argue that God has participated in the liberation of African Americans. It would be difficult for them to see a god outside of the white god that white people have presented to them since the beginning of slavery or perceive a national, group identity outside of that which has been created for them in the United States as inferior slaves. As a critique of Cone's liberation theology, William R. Jones suggested a set of criteria in evaluating the liberative nature of God for African Americans. Among the criteria, Jones argued one must investigate

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<sup>447</sup> William R. Jones, *Is God A White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Beacon Press, 1997), 113–14.

<sup>448</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 25–27.

the acts of God in human history and identify specific liberative acts and that the liberative acts identified must involve the particular group in question.<sup>449</sup>

Second, the Europeans used the Exodus motif as a biblical typology when they immigrated to the New World from Europe.<sup>450</sup> Once they decided to break political ties and develop autonomous countries from their European mother countries. In this typology, the New World was the Promised Land, a land that did not fall under the rule of European nations and their monarchs, which were compared to the biblical Pharaoh.<sup>451</sup>

However, this history cannot be divorced from African slavery in the New World. While the New World immigrants were free from the tyranny of European monarchs, they enslaved Africans and became tyrants, themselves. Although the enslaved Africans began to see themselves as the enslaved Israelites, their masters would emphasize that the Israelites achieved their freedom through an act of God. It would be unbiblical and immoral for them to take up arms and violently demand and take their freedom. They were to wait, patiently, for God to one day make them free. In many ways, dependence of the Exodus typology reinforces the master/slave relationship, encouraging African Americans to endure oppression as they wait for divine intervention to achieve freedom from white oppression.

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<sup>449</sup> Jones, *Is God A White Racist?*, 114.

<sup>450</sup> Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 74.

<sup>451</sup> Smith.

Colored by the use of Exodus in black religious and political thought, Tucker encounters difficulties when she attempts to reconcile Tupac's use of Exodus in his tattoo with his "Thug Life" bodily posture toward the world. Dyson describes the thug life posture toward the world, or "thug theology" in his words, as an understanding that God is an accomplice to violence. Thug theology also contains a "ready to die" element, in which one understands that violence committed against them may be the only way for one to "square up" with divinity for some act they have committed in the past. Although his "Exodus" tattoo carried the discourse of God liberating Moses and the Israelites from Egypt, a divine act, Tucker explains its tension with Tupac's hustler ethic by acknowledging there was no place for young black males in American society.<sup>452</sup> The discourse that Tucker claims is operative in Tupac's tattoo, the biblical Exodus, and ethical posture, violent human action whenever necessary, are inconsistent. However, Tucker does attempt to reconcile Tupac's "thug" ethic and her biblical interpretation of the tattoo. She claims that his thuggish behavior is justified by adopting the "eye-for-an-eye" approach that could be akin to "God's motto as he liberated the Hebrew slaves."<sup>453</sup>

However, examination of the photographs of the "Exodus" tattoo reveals the reason for the difficulty in reconciling Tupac's so-called Exodus discourse to his hustler's ethic. In fact, the tattoo may not refer to Exodus, Moses or the "Children of Israel." In two of the photographs, it is clear that the numbers inked under the word "Exodus" read 1831, not 18:11. When I flipped through the pages of Exodus in the Bible in order to

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<sup>452</sup> Tucker, "'Holler If Ya Hear Me,'" 73.

<sup>453</sup> Tucker, 72.

read the passage, Exodus 18:31, I discovered that the passage does not exist. Upon further investigation of the photographs of the "Exodus" tattoo, in a caption describing the tattoos on Shakur's back, a note is present that suggests that 1831 is not a reference to the Bible, but a reference to Nat Turner's insurrection<sup>454</sup> that began on August 21, 1831 in Southampton County, Virginia.<sup>455</sup> On that day, Nat Turner and his trusted conspirators, Hark Travis, Nelson Williams, Samuel Francis, Jack Reese, Will Francis and Henry Porter, met and decided to revolt against the slaveholders of Southampton County.<sup>456</sup> The revolt resulted in the murder of 55 white people, including slave holders, their wives, and children.<sup>457</sup> When Turner was captured on October 30, 1831, he was questioned and hanged 12 days later. His body was later chopped up into 18 pieces, leaving his material body as a sign, a discourse for other black bodies, especially those who may consider acts of revolution.<sup>458</sup>

I argue that Tupac's "Exodus" tattoo, despite its Christian significations, does indeed point to Nat Turner's insurrection. Shakur admired Nat Turner and spoke about the importance of African Americans looking toward Turner's revolt in the context of African Americans living in oppression in a 1994 interview at a radio station in

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<sup>454</sup> <http://www.2pac2k.de/tattoos.html>

<sup>455</sup> Jakobi Williams, "Nat Turner: The Complexity and Dynamic of His Religious Background," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4, no. 9 (January 2012): 117.

<sup>456</sup> Williams.

<sup>457</sup> Williams, 118–19.

<sup>458</sup> Williams, 124.

Sweden.<sup>459</sup> The interview was unreleased until it was later utilized in on the outro, called “Mortal Man,” on Kendrick Lamar’s album, *To Pimp a Butterfly*, where Kendrick Lamar recreated portions of the interview, as if he were the interviewer in 2015.<sup>460</sup> During the interview, Tupac stated:

Niggas is tired of grabbing shit out of the stores. The next time there is a riot, it’s going to be bloodshed. For real. I don’t think America know that. I think America think we were just playing. It’s going to be some more playing, but it ain’t gonna be no playing. It’s gone be murder. You know what I’m saying? It’s gone be like Nat Turner, 1831, up in this motherfucker. You know what I’m saying? It’s going to happen. It’s going to happen. America better do something...All of my kids have a crazy look in their eye.<sup>461</sup>

Notice that Shakur mentions Nat Turner and the year of his revolt, 1831. In terms of fighting for liberation in light of oppression, Tupac, in the interview references Nat Turner instead of the biblical Moses. Instead of utilizing a borrowed tradition from another culture that has been tainted by its use in making the bodies of enslaved Africans docile, Turner's insurrection encourages revolt on the part of those whose bodies are limited by the Exodus discourse. Revolt is different from the Exodus motif for liberation because humans act on behalf of themselves and death as a consequence of such action is

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<sup>459</sup> “Tupac Shakur Rare Unreleased 1994 Swedish Radio Interview (No Music) - YouTube,” n.d., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LbEnnrVyb-g>.

<sup>460</sup> Kendrick Lamar, *To Pimp A Butterfly* (Aftermath/ Interscope, 2015).

<sup>461</sup> “Tupac Shakur Rare Unreleased 1994 Swedish Radio Interview (No Music) - YouTube.”



probable.<sup>462</sup> I am not saying here that the Nat Turner's revolt did not make reference to a deity. He had three separate visions of what he interprets as God telling him that he must act. In the first vision, Turner witnessed black spirit and white spirits at war, causing the sun to turn black. This vision was interpreted by Turner as a sign of the imminent war that would occur between the enslaved community and their white masters.<sup>463</sup> Another vision occurred when he found drops of blood on corn, as though dew fell from heaven.<sup>464</sup> Turner's visions are what William James refers to as "original experiences" that exist in people who often become religious leaders.<sup>465</sup> They do not solely depend on Biblical tradition, but on direct revelation from the deity.

Turner's posture toward the world is more consistent with Tupac's own understanding of his rebellious actions toward society. One should revolt against the norms of society. It allows him to occupy time and space in his "hustler's" posture, knowing that both violence and death are part of one's reality, not something to fear. In his own words, "I'm going to die in violence...All good [black people] who change the world die in violence..."<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Williams, "Nat Turner: The Complexity and Dynamic of His Religious Background," 117.

<sup>463</sup> Karl Lampley, *A Theological Account of Nat Turner: Christianity, Violence, and Theology* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 52.

<sup>464</sup> "Nat Turner: The Complexity and Dynamic of His Religious Background," n.d., 15.

<sup>465</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* by William James, New Ed edition (Penguin Classics, 1985), 34.

<sup>466</sup> Tucker, "Holler If Ya Hear Me," 67.

### 5.1.5. Tupac, Complex Subjectivity, and New Consciousness

In light of Pinn's argument that religion involves confrontation of historical identity, reconstitution of the soul, new modes of behaving within a community religion, and the creation of a new consciousness, and a way of being that is not attached to the master/slave relationship, Tupac's Exodus tattoo can be considered an aesthetic presentation of his religion. Using Nat Turner's revolt as a guiding narrative disrupts the power relationship between African Americans and white Americans. It also speaks to the dependence against reliance on divine intervention in order to achieve liberation. If freedom is to occur, it will happen by the hands of human beings. In this mode of being, violence is an acceptable means to achieve the teleological end. Although this mode of being is not devoid of the presence of a deity, it is clear that African Americans will not wait for the divine to act on their behalf. The position is more akin to a form of humanocentric theism, where humans are responsible for their own liberation.<sup>467</sup>

Humanocentric theism is a form of what Anthony Pinn call weak humanism. In weak humanism, persons do not depend on God in order to achieve liberation. They work with God in order to achieve their goal. According to Pinn, weak humanists do not question the existence of God, but they become anxious when they review the history of God's activity in the world because they cannot find any evidence of God's activity or revelation that is apart from human activity.<sup>468</sup> Activity in the world is a joint effort between

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<sup>467</sup> Jones, *Is God A White Racist?*, 108.

<sup>468</sup> Anthony B. Pinn, *Why, Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (Continuum, 1999), 141.

humanity and God. While the transcendent being sets the ultimate plan for humankind, humans are ultimately responsible for executing the plan. Human beings function as partners with the deity.<sup>469</sup> In this stance, liberation is uncertain. That is it may never happen because humans may, and often do, fail.

In addition, slavers utilized the Exodus typology in order to make enslaved Africans docile, enduring the pain and suffering that occurred under chattel slavery in the United States. Although, as I have argued earlier, punishment in the form of whipping, hanging, dismemberment, and the treat of being sold was used to discourage escape, the Exodus motif provides the religious and moral justification to abstain from the use of violence in order to secure their freedom.<sup>470</sup> In Exodus, Moses and Israel secure their freedom by the divine act of God and the people did not commit one violent act. Although many people died in the story, all death was the result of an act of God or God's messenger. However, the Exodus of 1831, although (one could argue that it was a failed revolt), establishes a new way to live for African Americans. A way that is not quiet to oppression and injustice. It's a new posture in the world for those who experience oppression and those whose agency has been quelled. It is an ethic, a way of being and doing that works toward liberation by their own hands, even if it fails. As the proverb says, "To have tried and to have failed is better than to never have tried at all."

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<sup>469</sup> Jones, *Is God A White Racist?*, 187.

<sup>470</sup> Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 64.

### 5.1.6. Implications

Interpreting Shakur's Exodus tattoo highlights some particular issues for religious studies scholars. First, both Dyson and Tucker interpret the written text instead of the body as they attempt to interpret the Exodus tattoo. Instead of reading Tupac's tattoos, they turn to the bible, or at least they read his body through the biblical tradition. They assume that Exodus signifies the biblical tradition and misread the tattoo in light of this tradition. It is important when reading tattoos, and doing analytical work on bodies, scholars must analyze in the context of the body they are reading. It is almost difficult to read and interpret tattoos without the some input from the tattooed person in which we are attempting to interpret. We must understand their tattoo narrative to uncover important information regarding the nature and meaning behind their tattoos. Tattoo narratives serve in an important way to creating meaning. They provide the in by an intellectual and emotional context for the tattoo.<sup>471</sup>

Second, Tupac's Exodus tattoo, also points to an important event that happens within African American cultural history. I argued before that the biblical Exodus story is the story of another cultural group, the people of Israel. It speaks of their relationship with God in their cultural history, not the relationship of God with African American people. Given this perspective, the biblical Exodus is, at best, a borrowed story about a deity foreign to African Americans. Just as the Hebrew people memorialized an event that happened in their cultural history, the Passover, in the Exodus story (later adopted

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<sup>471</sup> Ibid., 12.

and reinterpreted by Christians at the Last Supper in the Eucharist and/or Communion), African Americans should memorialize significant events that have occurred in their history for the continued development of religious traditions and religious practices. Tupac's Exodus tattoo represents a memorialization of such event. Nat Turner's revolt is an event that African Americans can claim as their own. The implications of what we have discovered from Tupac is that African Americans should mark out and determine significant events in their own history to celebrate and memorialize. Tupac, although both Dyson and Tucker misread his tattoo, read his body through a particular religious and social landscape, Christianity. Because of this prejudice, both Tucker and Dyson assume that Shakur's tattoo belongs to the tradition of Moses, who depends on divine intervention for the freedom or liberation of African American peoples.

Third, analyzing tattoos, including Tupac's Exodus tattoo, challenges the idea that there is one singular history from which to observe black bodies. If scholars of religion are to take the body seriously, as a central point of religious studies, they must do so without making a monolithic, idealized body. Kelly Brown Douglas, M. Shawn Copeland, and Anthony Pinn, have begun to highlight the importance of material bodies in black religion. Their texts clearly state their intention to make the body central in their analysis. In an effort to centralize the body in the study of African American religion, scholars of black religion have discussed black bodies as monolithic or collective bodies in their formation of theological and religious thought. By the collective, they have created a typology that has become the standard by which to measure their theology. In other words, they focus on the experience of the "type" of African American body that has experienced the most suffering within the context of the United States and then

normalize that “type.” So, for example, in the case of Kelly Brown Douglas, the “blues body,” becomes the collective, monolithic experience by which her crossroads theology is created. Although she creates the blues body, that particular body is best represented by black women, who she believes have suffered the most aggressive forms of oppression. As a result, the collective and monolithic descriptions of black bodies hide the individual in favor of the collective. Although Tupac, because of his prominence and his early embrace of tattooing, was a part of this study, he by no means all black bodies in terms of the meaning creation represented in African American tattooing. He is just one of many who has displayed, through his body, his personal beliefs and principles. Given the environment of many folks who claim to be more spiritual than religious, we must not exhort one person, ideal type or tradition over the other when we continue to study African American religious forms and traditions.

Discursive descriptions of the black bodies create a singular, monolithic black body, which is not representative of the true diversity and complexity of black bodies. The focus on discursive bodies points to a particular historical time and social environment that has been romanticized and utilized to create a singular black identity and does not account for the complexity of black identity or the complexity of today’s social environment. According to some thinkers in the study of religion, such as Eddie Glaude and Victor Anderson, the problem is rooted in the presumption that all African

Americans share a continuous history.<sup>472</sup> Black identity (racial discourse) is based on a collective idea that all black people in America share a common history. This archeological idea of black identity, based on some perceived historical myth, creates normative modes of ontological blackness.

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<sup>472</sup> See: Eddie S. Glaude Jr, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*, Reprint edition (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2008), 68–69; Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 1999), 91–92; *ibid.*, 29,42.

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