

“The Contact of Living Souls”

Interracial Friendship, Faith, and African American
Memories of Slavery and Freedom

One of the leading American radicals of the early twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois had few kind words for whites of the post-Civil War era. He repeatedly indicted them for their failure to incorporate African Americans into the nation. The years after the Civil War were a tragedy, he maintained, but not because African Americans lacked grit, heart, or ability. Whites were at fault. North and South, they preferred to hold blacks down as an inexpensive workforce, rather than lift them up as brothers, sisters, and friends. “God wept,” Du Bois concluded his Marxian-influenced *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America* (1935). Money and the quest for power drove the hearts of white men.¹ But not all whites received Du Bois’s censure; one group he praised—the more than three thousand northern men and women of both races, but mostly white, who traveled south to teach in schools for African Americans. Yankee missionaries carried the cross and the school primer into the postwar South, and Du Bois considered them heroes of the age. He concluded one chapter of *Black Reconstruction* by applauding their efforts at interracial friendship: “through it all has gone a thread of brave and splendid friendship from those few and rare men and women of white skins, North and South, who have dared to know and help and love black folk.”²

Teachers from the North were not the only white spiritual forces in African American memories of slavery and freedom. Along with the schoolmarms was Jesus Christ himself. An incarnated Christ too resided in the memories of some African Americans. Speaking to an anthropologist in the 1920s, one southern black preacher remembered of the age of enslavement, "I saw the Lord in the east part of the world, and he looked like a white man. His hair was parted in the middle, and he looked like he had been dipped in snow, and he was talking to me." The arrival of this white Jesus and his words encouraged this slave to become a minister and to challenge the structures of his oppression.³ Du Bois acknowledged these memories in *Black Reconstruction*. As he wrote of the end of the Civil War, "to most of the four million black folk emancipated by civil war, God was real. They knew Him. They had met Him personally."⁴

What are we to make of these memories of interracial interaction from slavery and Reconstruction in the early twentieth century, the time often termed the Age of Jim Crow, when racial segregation had become the dominant structure of the South, if not the nation? Why did Du Bois find memories of interactions with God and with white teachers so powerful and important? What do these encounters and narratives of encounter tell us about the importance of memory, of religion, and of interracial friendship in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? What do these memories reveal about the idea of interracialism in the minds and hearts of many women and men of color? And finally, did memories of education and religion—two factors rarely associated with radicalism—have any radical or subversive meaning for African Americans in the early twentieth century?⁵

Studies of historical memory, particularly of slavery and the Civil War, have shed new light on just about every facet of American history. David Blight demonstrated how memories of the Civil War influenced politics and race in the decades following the war. Kathleen Clark's *Defining Moments* examined the role of social and political commemorations among African Americans in the process of postwar community formation and debate. In *The Southern Past*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage traced clashes of race and culture in the South from the Civil War to the late twentieth century. Before these studies, Nina Silber and Grace Elizabeth Hale detailed how constructed memories of an idyllic plantation past led southern whites of the early twentieth century to rationalize their cultures of segregation and exploitation.⁶

Historical memories held a crucial place in radical and reformist African American traditions. “Good whites” were an important element in African American antislavery literature before the Civil War. Whether it was Frederick Douglass praising the young white men he encountered for acknowledging that he “had as good a right to be free as *they* had;” and that “they did not believe God ever made any one to be a slave,” or whether it was William Wells Brown who not only took the name of the white Quaker (William Wells) who helped him but also dedicated his freedom narrative to the man, African American activists cheered whites who were willing to help them escape from bondage. Oftentimes, the good white served as a literary and moral counterpoint to the evil white. This juxtaposition allowed African American activists and writers to indict the behavior of some whites and the system of slavery without denouncing all white people.⁷

In the realm of protest literature and radicalism, memory has been vital. Zoe Trodd, John Stauffer, Timothy Patrick McCarthy, and Scot French have shown that memories of nineteenth-century radicals, particularly John Brown and Nat Turner, helped shape the trajectories of radicalism. Whether invoking John Brown’s body when marching to war, as Union soldiers often did, or whether calling upon the image of Nat Turner as an African American who achieved his manhood by standing violently against oppression, as Du Bois did, memories of militant abolitionists helped sustain the work of later reformers and radicals.⁸

In the estimates of many historians and activists in the twentieth century, however, religion and education—especially interracial education and the white Jesus—have rarely been associated with liberation or radical memory. Religion and education have been seen often as twin pillars of control, not contest. Several historians characterize the post-Civil War educational missions to southern African Americans as bourgeois efforts of Victorian control. Most bluntly, historian Ronald Butchart contended that education was given to freedpeople, neither as a glorious gift nor as a punishment for southern whites, but in an effort to avoid granting African Americans “meaningful power.” Blacks needed land, political authority, and protection, Butchart maintained. Education was merely a means of class control in which northern capitalists sought to inculcate time management, sobriety, thrift, and the Protestant work ethic into the newly freed slaves so that they would become a manageable and reliable workforce in the South. “In other words,”

Butchart claimed, “the school was not given to the freedmen to facilitate liberation. It was given them in place of liberation.” Butchart concluded that education was an “easy panacea” for the South, not a genuine answer. Eric Foner summarized the consensus view of the educational crusade by claiming it was a “typical . . . amalgam of benevolent uplift and social control.”⁹

Similarly, African American Protestantism and religion of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has encountered its share of criticism, especially any notion of African Americans believing in a white Jesus. Marcus Garvey, for example, blasted the notion of a white Jesus in the early twentieth century. He admonished African Americans: “Never admit that Jesus Christ was a white man, otherwise he could not be the Son of God and God to redeem all mankind.”¹⁰ In 1940, after assessing African American perspectives on God, Jesus, angels, demons, and heaven and hell and finding that many African American youth believed Jesus to be white, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier concluded: “Paradoxical as it may seem the Negro church, an institution which is the product of Negro leadership and cooperation, does little to give Negroes a sense of personal worth and dignity in a world where everything tends to disparage the Negro . . . [T]he religious ideology of the Negro church tends to perpetuate such notions as a white God and white angels, conceptions which tend toward the disparagement of things black.”¹¹ Malcolm X regarded the belief in a white Jesus by African Americans as terrible evidence of the brainwashing of black America. In the early 1970s, historian and one of the founders of black liberation theology Gayraud Wilmore complained that the post-Civil War black church suffered from a process of “deradicalization.”¹²

But during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was nothing easy or conservative about African American education or interaction with the sacred. The white teachers who ventured South were mostly women with little political access; they were hated by many white southerners and attacked by some. The postwar conditions were terrible and terrifying, whether it was the devastated landscape or hostile former Confederates. And in a nation where literacy was vital to reading contracts, casting votes, and building community, education was certainly connected to issues of land acquisition, political power, and organizational development.¹³ Frederick Douglass, for instance, knew that whites desired to keep education and faith from African Americans in slavery and in freedom. He remembered vividly in *My Bondage*

and My Freedom the time when whites stopped his Sunday School class militantly. “Our first Sabbath passed delightfully, and I spent the week after very joyously . . . I learned that there was some objection to the existence of the Sabbath school; and, sure enough, we had scarcely got at work—*good work*, simply teaching a few colored children how to read the gospel of the Son of God—when in rushed a mob, headed by Mr. Wright Fairbanks and Mr. Garrison West—two class leaders—and Master Thomas; who, armed with sticks and other missiles, drove us off, and commanded us never to meet for such a purpose again.” According to Douglass, this militant behavior shook his faith in southern whites and in southern religion.¹⁴ Whether it was slave patrols breaking up Sunday Schools in the antebellum era or Ku Klux Klan members attacking African American schools and churches in the postbellum era, it is clear that many southern whites saw something subversive and radical in the religious and educational efforts of African Americans.

This is what makes the importance of interracial interaction all the more interesting in these contexts. A number of African Americans prized interracial friendship, particularly in the contexts of education and religion, knowing full well that many whites opposed violently their education and religious advancement. An examination of memories of white religious teachers—whether of the missionaries from the North or encounters with an incarnated Christ—adds another element to memory and radicalism, or at the least African American subversiveness, in the post-Civil War years. “Good” and “sacred” whites performed important literary and cultural work, and memories of interracial interaction in the Age of Jim Crow were essential to maintaining faith in the radical struggle. Early twentieth-century recollections of northern white teachers and of a white Christ in the slave South suggest that people of color constructed memories of encounters with good, helpful whites in an effort to offset their interactions with harmful, hurtful, exploitative whites. The Reconstruction teachers and Jesus himself became examples of mercy in a world of madness; they were avenues of improvement in a world of insecurity; they were harbingers of a potential new realm in a world that looked so much like the old regime. Memories of interracialism had a spiritual and sacred quality to them, as if something transcendent happened during black-white encounters. Ultimately, memories of interactions with white teachers and Christs shows that interracial friendship had the power to challenge notions of authority, American law and custom, and

structures of racial interactions. These memories provided a counterimage to how friendships and relationships could function within a white supremacist world of segregation and lynching.

Reconstruction Missions and Historical Memory in Black and White

When W. E. B. Du Bois praised the northern schoolteachers during Reconstruction, he did what he did best as a historian: he stood against reigning paradigms. During the first half of the twentieth century, many white historians and authors derided northern whites who went south during and after the Civil War. By the 1940s and 1950s, it was commonplace for white historians to mock these missionaries. Wilbur Cash, Henry Swint, and George B. Bentley, for instance, considered northern educators insensitive extremists who poured salt in the wounds of defeated and dejected southern whites. To them, these teachers had little understanding of racial dynamics in the South and inflamed tensions by seeking to raise African Americans out of their “place.”¹⁵

In part, Swint and Bentley followed the work of pseudohistorian and novelist Thomas Dixon Jr. His amazingly popular novels helped create the idea that Reconstruction was an epic failure because of the evil machinations of radical Republicans and the sexual lusts of African American men for white women. According to Dixon, Ku Klux Klan members were the saviors not only of the South, but of the entire United States.¹⁶ Dixon regularly attacked white female missionaries. In *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden* (1902), he described one in this way:

She was a woman of prepossessing appearance, well past thirty-five, with streaks of grey appearing in her smoothly brushed black hair. She was dressed plainly in rich brown material cut in tailor fashion, and her heavy hair was drawn straight up pompadour style from her forehead with apparent carelessness and yet in a way that heightened the impression of strength and beauty in her face. Her nose was the one feature that gave warning of trouble in an encounter. She was plump in figure, almost stout, and her nose seemed too small for the breadth of her face. It was broad enough, but too short, and was pug tipped

slightly at the end. She fell just a little short of being handsome and this nose was responsible for the failure. It gave to her face when agitated, in spite of evident culture and refinement, the expression of a feminine bull dog.¹⁷

For Dixon, the body was the sign. Her nose, which had the appearance of a dog's, was the emblem of her lack of whiteness or civility. In a not-so-polite way, Dixon crafted a white woman who reached out to African Americans as a female dog.

White supremacists had good reason to assail the work of northern missions to the South. It should not surprise us that the first Ku Klux Klan attacked these teachers. Some were denounced as “nigger teachers,” and Alonzo Corliss, a partially crippled teacher, was dragged from his home in 1869, lashed thirty times, had half of his head shaved and painted black, and then warned to leave. The Klan made little effort to veil the reasons for their opposition: those like Corliss were “teaching niggers and making them like white men.”¹⁸ Missionary groups and southern blacks created a host of schools, colleges, and universities for the educational advancement of African Americans that proved critical to the fight against white supremacy in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Atlanta University, Fisk University, Clark University, Morehouse College, Scotia Seminary, Howard University, and Lincoln University were some of the most prominent schools established by the Reconstruction missionary efforts.¹⁹

The Reconstruction teachers played a powerful role in African American life in the post-Civil War South. By 1892, there were more than 25,000 schools for African Americans in the South, with more than 20,000 southern blacks teaching in them. Of these teachers, 13,000 had themselves been educated in schools created during radical Reconstruction. More than two million southern blacks had learned to read by the early 1890s, and many of them could write as well. These schools, moreover, did not collapse in the dark days of the “nadir” of race relations. Schools for southern blacks continued to persevere throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The educational crusade also provided theological seminaries for African American religious leaders and fuel for the rise of the African American press. By the early 1890s, more than 150 newspapers in the South were edited by African Americans, several of which were published at black colleges. This black press helped create a counter-public sphere in which African Americans could resist the

derogatory reports of their lives and qualities that permeated the white press. Furthermore, the press provided opportunities for African Americans to hone their literary skills and their arguments against racial exploitation.²⁰

The growth of black schools and newspapers was matched by an amazing rise in African American literacy, which the Reconstruction education crusade had helped to bring about. As of 1865, less than 10 percent of southern blacks were literate. By 1870, that rate had only advanced to 18.6 percent, but only two decades later, it was more than 55 percent. By 1940, African American literacy stood at 89 percent.²¹ Put in an international perspective, this increase was particularly impressive. African American educational improvements far outstripped similar gains in other nations.²²

Schools, rising literacy, and a prodigious black press provided black men and women with a sense of “collective empowerment,” to use historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s phrase, that allowed them to continue the fight for civil rights into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As the Secretary of the American Missionary Association pointed out in 1892, “In 1865 there were two negro attorneys; there are now 250. Twenty-seven years ago there were three colored physicians; now there are 749.”²³ Modern scholars like Higginbotham, Clarence Walker, Glenda Gilmore, and Stephanie Shaw have shown that a powerful African American middle class emerged from the Reconstruction schools, and this new “black bourgeois” was dedicated to fighting for black men’s and women’s political and social rights.²⁴

The education crusade left a heritage of memories for black and white civil rights advocates. Black reformers testified to the importance of these schools in the formation of their social justice consciousness. One African American reformer during this time, for instance, remembered that her instructors at Scotia Seminary, an institution that continued to employ a biracial faculty, taught that “the color of a person’s skin has nothing to do with his brains, and that color, caste, or class distinctions are an evil thing.”²⁵ A graduate of Richmond Theological Seminary, who became the pastor of Pilgrim Baptist Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, claimed that his education instilled into him a quest for racial uplift. “My course of study,” he wrote, “has caused me to yearn for their up-building, intellectually, financially, morally, and spiritually, as never before.”²⁶

White radicals of the postwar era felt similarly. John Greenleaf Whittier versed of freedpeople’s education in 1869: “They are rising,—all are rising, /

The black and white together!”²⁷ Northern novelist and radical Republican Albion Tourgée remembered the Protestant responses to the end of the war as a magnificent moment in world history: “Perhaps there has been no grander thing in our history [than when] the civilization of the North in the very hour of victory threw aside the cartridge-box, and appealed at once to the contribution-box to heal the ravages of war.” To Tourgée, “it was the noblest spectacle that Christian civilization has ever witnessed.”²⁸

In the years following Reconstruction, the efforts of the missionary teachers provided African Americans with images and memories of heroic whites who linked arms with people of color to attack white supremacy. Writing in 1954, the same year as the Supreme Court’s *Brown v. the Board of Education* decision, Rayford Logan claimed that the Reconstruction schools “ignited a spark which burst into flame in the twentieth century.”²⁹ Throughout his long career, W. E. B. Du Bois continually looked back to the missionary teachers for encouragement and even characterized himself as a part of their legacy. He referred to their mission as a “Ninth Crusade” and the female missionaries as “women who dared.”³⁰ In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois heaped accolades upon them. They were to him “saintly souls” who took part in “the finest thing in American history.” What they offered, more than anything, “was the contact of living souls.”³¹

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Du Bois seemed to hold the radical abolitionist John Brown in the same high regard as he did these schoolteachers. In 1909, he published his biography of John Brown, where he claimed that Brown’s willingness to link with African Americans and his insight into the spiritual evil of slavery made him a true radical. “John Brown worked not simply for Black Men—he worked with them; and he was a companion of their daily life, knew their faults and virtues, and felt, as few white Americans have felt, the bitter tragedy of their lot.” A deep spiritual connection was a sign of white radicalism. He regarded his Brown biography as “at once a record of and a tribute to the man who of all Americans has perhaps come nearest to touching the real souls of black folk.”³² Only two years later, in his 1911 novel *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, Du Bois applauded a white schoolteacher for her willingness to join with African Americans in their struggles. One of the main characters, Sarah Smith, was a white missionary from the North who declared that southern blacks were “God’s sort” of people. When opposed by other whites, Smith declared, “I don’t

want us to be the only ones that count. I want to live in a world where every soul counts—white, black, and yellow—all. *That's* what I'm teaching these children here.”³³

Positive memories of these schoolteachers and their influence could be found far and wide. By 1919, Samuel Robert Cassius had seen a lot of America. He was born in the mid-1850s as a slave in Virginia. During the Civil War, he traveled to Washington, D.C., as part of the displaced community of African Americans searching for freedom. From there, he became a preacher with the Disciples of Christ. He trekked throughout the Midwest, established a short-lived industrial school, and attacked the white supremacist writings of Charles Carroll and Thomas Dixon Jr. in his interestingly titled *The Third Birth of a Nation*. Looking back on his life, Cassius had fond memories for his time as a child in the nation's capitol. It was there that he learned to read, there that he found spiritual salvation, there that he heard his calling. He remembered a school established for freed women and men and particularly his teacher. “The teacher that faced us,” he wrote in 1919, “was a Christian white woman, who met us colored children with a New Testament in her hand.” The Bible and this woman's influence were paramount in his life: “Nor did that Testament cease to be part of our education; it was that that fixed it in my mind that the Bible was God's revealed will to man, and made it impossible for me to ever be . . . 'a Christian only.’”³⁴

Cassius was hardly alone. Referring to the American Missionary Association, one African American claimed, “[O]f all organizations that have been working among us as a race, your great Association has shown most of the spirit of what I call true, genuine Christianity.”³⁵ Henry Hugh Proctor, a graduate of Fisk University and Yale's Divinity School, professed that the Reconstruction crusade was “without exception . . . the very finest thing in American history.”³⁶ Even Booker T. Washington, who in the 1890s encouraged African Americans to abandon the fight for social and political equality in favor of economic improvement, asserted that “[w]henever it was written—and I hope it will be—the part that the Yankee teachers played in the education of the Negroes immediately after the war will make one of the most thrilling parts of the history of this country.”³⁷

To these and countless other African Americas, the “crusade of the Yankee schoolmarm” held a symbolic power that should not be repudiated or forgotten. They left a legacy of friendship, contact, and brotherhood, a

legacy that white supremacists could twist and turn but could never efface. During the decades of lynching and disenfranchisement, memories of interracial friendship helped African Americans persevere in their push for an open and egalitarian nation. The white Reconstruction teachers were the imagined children of the abolitionists. During Reconstruction, for instance, one former slaveholder complained that “John Brown’s daughter” had come to teach former slaves.³⁸ Memories of interracial education and contact from the post–Civil War South provided African Americans hope that future justice could be won in an integrated America where whites and blacks could enjoy the “contact of living souls.”³⁹

A Little White Jesus in the Age of Segregation

Northerners were not the only whites in the field of memory seeking to help embattled African Americans. Many men and women of color in the early twentieth century claimed to have seen Jesus Christ while in bondage. Claiming to see and interact with God and Jesus was part of a long tradition that stretched back into the decades of slavery. It was part of African American attempts to find an authority beyond that of their masters and mistresses, beyond that of the laws of the United States and their states in particular, beyond that of the U.S. Constitution or the Declaration of Independence. The assertion of divine contact, moreover, subverted the belief among whites that they were the ones with access to the sacred—or sat as intermediaries for African American contact with the divine.⁴⁰ In the 1840s, for instance, one Virginia woman said that “de good Lawd gibs us eyes t’ see t’ings dey doan see, an’ he comes t’ me, a poor brack woman, an’ tells me be patient, ’cause dar’s no wite nor brack in hebben. An’ de time’s comin’ when he’ll make his brack chilluns free in dis yere worl; an gib ’em larnin,’ an’ good homes, an’ good times. Ah! honey, I knows, I knows!”⁴¹

David Walker firmly believed that it would be through sacred power and an alliance with God that African Americans would transform the United States and world. In his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* of 1829, he wrote, “It is my solemn belief, that if ever the world becomes Christianized . . . it will be through the means, under God of the *Blacks*.” The Lord will help black Americans, he continued, “God will indeed, deliver you through him from

your deplorable and wretched condition under the Christians of America.”⁴² Two years later, after his failed slave revolt, Nat Turner responded to Thomas Gray’s challenge, “Do you not find yourselves mistaken now?” by associating himself with Jesus. Turner answered, “Was not Christ crucified?”⁴³ Clearly, the response was much more of a rhetorical remark than question. Claiming interaction or association with God and Jesus was clearly part of a lineage of African American resistance, even violent resistance, to enslavement.

Numerous southern African American recollections of sacred visions were recorded through oral interviews conducted in the late 1920s by Andrew Polk Watson, an anthropology student at Fisk University in Tennessee, one of the schools established by the Reconstruction missions. In their memories of slavery, emancipation, and the Southern world after the Civil War, these women and men recounted visions of angels, demons, God, and Christ. They inhabited an enchanted world where the sacred routinely invaded their tangible and imaginary landscapes. Although most often used by historians for insight into slave religion, the accounts spoke also to the context of the early twentieth century. The narrators described encounters with the divine with freshness and vitality. It seemed that the interviewee was almost beholding and feeling the images again at the time of retelling. None of them discounted their tales of encountering God or the devil. None claimed to have hallucinated or exaggerated. The sacred forces had immense power. They could enslave and destroy bodies and minds, free and unite families, heal medical ailments, and render white masters powerless. Jesus emerged as a deceptive messiah in these tales, perhaps a trickster member of the trinity who could change the world before white supremacists could stop him.⁴⁴

Compiled by George Rawlick and published later as part of *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography* and separately as *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves*, Watson’s work entailed the conversion narratives of a few dozen African American women and men. Unlike many of the narratives related to white workers for the Works Progress Administration collected in the late 1930s, the *God Struck Me Dead* interviews were conducted by and for African Americans. The methodological concerns that lead scholars to wonder about the veracity and meaning of the WPA narratives do not apply to Watson’s collection.⁴⁵

It is easy to be struck by the prevalence of whiteness in these recollections. It was everywhere. One woman, for instance, recalled that Jesus “was

standing in snow—the prettiest, whitest snow I have ever seen.” And when she witnessed God, he was “sitting in a big armchair. Everything seemed to be made of white stones and pearls.”⁴⁶ Another interviewee remembered that “Jesus came to me just as white as dripping snow, with his hair parted in the middle just as white as snow.”⁴⁷ One black man recalled, “I seen Christ with his hair parted in the center. He was white as snow.”⁴⁸

The Jesus of these imaginings was surrounded by whiteness, permeated by it, and in many ways defined by it. At first glance, these southern blacks appear to have accepted the association of whiteness with the sacred in American culture. At least since the early nineteenth century, white Americans had envisioned Jesus (and created visual representations of him) as a white man usually with brown hair and a beard.⁴⁹ These were the types of comments that upset black separatists like Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, sociologists like E. Franklin Frazier, and ministers like Henry McNeal Turner.⁵⁰ Reverend Turner in the 1890s declared that to believe in a white Jesus meant Christian betrayal: “Demented though we be,” he claimed in a speech titled “God is a Negro,” “whenever we reach the conclusion that God or even that Jesus Christ, while in the flesh, was a white man, we shall hang our gospel trumpet upon the willow and cease to preach.”⁵¹

But the whiteness of this Jesus was complicated, subtle, and perhaps an indictment of white supremacy itself. Just as a white John Brown served as a black revolutionary, according to Du Bois and more recently historian John Stauffer, the white Jesus could be against the structures of whiteness.⁵² In *The White Image in the Black Mind*, Mia Bay contends that whiteness was not the full domain of white people. Whiteness was a spiritual signifier as well as a racial one. When not attached to or conflated with white supremacy, whiteness could mean holiness. Thus, numerous African Americans believed that an individual turned “white” in heaven—that the soul was made white. This did not mean that all who were physically white would reach heaven. In fact, in the estimates of most men and women of color, hurtful and exploitative whites were going to hell, not heaven. In short, whiteness had little to do with phenotype, or perceived phenotype, and much more to do with attitude and action, faith and belief.⁵³

Moreover, whiteness was not the only factor of note in the recollections of these former slaves. The physical sizes of God’s messengers were just as important as the surrounding colors or skin tone. On almost all occasions,

the sacred was small. Repeatedly, interviewees reported seeing “a little man” who was God’s herald. Sometimes the messenger was an angel, sometimes Christ, and sometimes God himself.⁵⁴ One respondent remembered, “God came to me as a little man . . . He was dressed in dark, but later he came dressed in white.”⁵⁵ A student at Fisk University told of a time when “a little child came to my bedside and got his hand in mine and said, ‘Fear not, for lo! I am with you always.’” In this memory, the little child channeled the words of the biblical Christ.⁵⁶

The divine visitors also appeared in military garb on occasion. Most of the warrior rhetoric was imported from the biblical book of Revelations. One angel, a “little man, very small and with waxen fire,” carried on his shoulder “a spear, and on the end of it was a star that outshone the morning sun.” Then, when Jesus appeared, he came “with great power, having on his breastplate, buckler, and shield . . . He spoke, and out of his mouth came fire.”⁵⁷ Another responded that he saw God “sitting in a large armchair, his head up and looking into space . . . He wore a full armor, and across his chest was a breast-protector that shone as if it was made of bars of gold.”⁵⁸

Usually diminutive, usually white, and sometimes dressed for combat, this Christ character appeared to African American critics as part of the broader culture of white supremacy that sanctified notions of black inferiority and ungodliness. Yet, if one listens to the interviewees, Jesus had a powerful impact on those he visited. He was a subtly subversive savior. Christ crossed the color line, and he did so not to dominate, rape, or exploit. By the time of Watson’s interviews, segregation had become not only a legal bulwark in the South, but also an overarching culture. And churches and religious organizations were some of the most segregated places. Whites patrolled sacred space almost as militantly as they did white women’s bodies.⁵⁹

Within this context, the interviewed black women and men recalled encounters with a white man—a white man who came to them for their benefit, rather than their harm. These were rebellious sacred memories in tenuous times. By describing and remembering mystical encounters with a white man, these African Americans subtly asserted that blacks and whites could share sacred space, that friendship with whites was possible, and that God was on the side of people of color.

Several African Americans recounted feeling emboldened by their encounters with this sacred being. One former slave, who had long been

whipped by his master and trembled in his sight, recalled that after being visited by the divine, "my master came down the field. I became very bold and answered him when he called me . . . I told him that I had been talking with God Almighty, and that it was God who had plowed up the corn." The master was confused and seemed to sense that his slave "no longer dreaded the whipping I knew I would get." The rolls of the slave system became reversed; the slave was brave and the master afraid. "My master looked at me and seemed to tremble," this narrator affirmed.⁶⁰ Another black man who witnessed a small white Christ felt strengthened to become a preacher. His encounters with Christ led to a fixed belief that God would help men and women of color. "I believe that God heard my people when they called on him," he declared.⁶¹

Those interviewed by Watson did not provide uniform descriptions of God or Christ. But their recollections spoke significantly to the place of sacred and interracial encounters in their memories. For a handful, divine manhood was defined by militancy and the true God was a god of war who would battle against injustice. For most others, however, this sacred being was defined by his whiteness and his smallness. Akin to the Brer Rabbit tales where smallish and seemingly weak animals outwit and outmaneuver bigger and stronger foes, accounts of a white Jesus and God were deceptive.⁶² What was small to the human eye might be huge in the sacred scope. With folklore and subtle sacred stories, southern blacks had long passed down traditions of cloaked personal and communal resistance. A white Christ who appeared before an African American was transgressing the color line, and by empowering the enslaved, he undermined the culture and structure of slavery and segregation. Everyday southern blacks created a subversive savior in an unlikely place—in the vision of a small white Christ who did not offend white supremacist culture but lurked around its edges undermining and challenging it.



What have often been treated separately—the crusade of the northern teachers and the appearances of Christ to southern blacks—may have had something powerful in common. Memories of Yankee schoolteachers and of the diminutive white Christ were subversive in the Age of Jim Crow. Memories of interracial friendship, especially in the realm of education and religion, challenged

where authority resided (whether in American law, culture, and custom or in the hands of a sacred power), challenged customary understandings of interracial interaction, and challenged understandings of the influence of the sacred in American history. At least in the land of memory, these were whites who crossed the color line. These were whites who did so to help and not to hurt. These reminiscences had a spiritual tone to them, as if interracialism was more than a dream or desire. It was construed as a holy imperative. Perhaps these memories of interracialism were so important because they kept so many African Americans from rejecting white society completely, from seeing all whites as evil devils to be avoided or killed. Perhaps these memories helped keep the United States together when so many in the early twentieth century saw a destiny of strife or genocide. Memories of “good” whites encountering embattled African Americans in the ages of slavery and freedom showed that the “contact of living souls,” as Du Bois put it, was at once a subversive memory, aim, and vision.

NOTES

1. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935; reprt., New York: Atheneum, 1992), 634.
2. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 708. For a discussion of whites in Du Bois’s imagination, see Edward J. Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois, American Prophet* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 110–13.
3. Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead: Voices of Ex-Slaves* (1969; reprt., Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1993), 74–75.
4. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction*, 124. For more on Du Bois and religion, see Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois*. For more on African Americans and Jesus, see Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994); Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), ch. 6; and Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).
5. For the importance of interracial friendship and interaction, see John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race,*

- Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), ch. 2; Paul Harvey, *Freedom's Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
6. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic*; David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); Kathleen Ann Clark, *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration and Political Culture in the South, 1863–1913* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006); Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Vintage, 1999); Nina Silber, *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).
 7. William Wells Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown: A Fugitive Slave Written by Himself,” in *Puttin’ On Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1969); Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855; reprt., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1968), 156.
 8. John Stauffer and Timothy Patrick McCarthy, eds., *Prophets of Protest: Reconsidering the History of American Abolitionism* (New York: The New Press, 2006); Scot French, *The Rebellious Slave: Nat Turner in American Memory* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003); Zoe Trodd and John Stauffer, eds., *Meteor of War: The John Brown Story* (Rancho Cucamonga, CA: Brandywine Press, 2004); Zoe Trodd, ed., *American Protest Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2006); Booker T. Washington and W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Negro in the South: His Economic Progress in Relation to His Moral and Religious Development* (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company, 1907), 160–62.
 9. Ronald E. Butchart, *Northern Schools, Southern Blacks, and Reconstruction: Freedmen's Education, 1862–1875* (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1980), 107. In many ways, Butchart's scathing critique of the freedpeople's education squares with William McFeely's work on the Freedmen's Bureau and Leon Litwack's study of black responses to emancipation. See William S. McFeely, *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1968); and Leon F. Litwack, *Been in the Storm So Long: the Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Knopf, 1979), 452–98. The consensus view on northern schoolteachers as paternalists is best viewed in Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 146–47.
 10. Quoted in Randall K. Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement: The Institutionalization*

- of a *Black Civil Religion* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978), 53.
11. E. Franklin Frazier, *Negro Youth at the Crossways: Their Personality Development in the Middle States* (1940; reprint., New York: Schocken Books, 1967), 115–16.
 12. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, (1973; 2nd rev. ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), ch. 6. “God’s Angry Men,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 18 May 1957, 5; quoted in Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 46.
 13. For more on the political, social, and religious power of these missions, see Blum, *Reforging the White Republic*, ch. 2; Heather Andrea Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
 14. Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 200.
 15. Henry Lee Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South, 1862–1870* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 1941); George R. Bentley, *A History of the Freedmen’s Bureau* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955); Wilbur Joseph Cash, *The Mind of the South* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1941).
 16. Thomas Dixon Jr., *The Leopard’s Spots: A Romance of the White Man’s Burden, 1865–1900* (New York: Doubleday, Page, and Company, 1902); Thomas Dixon, *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, Publishers, 1905); Maxwell Bloomfield, “Dixon’s ‘Leopard’s Spots’: A Study in Popular Racism,” *American Quarterly* (Autumn, 1964): 387–401; F. Garvin Davenport Jr., “Thomas Dixon’s Mythology of Southern History,” *The Journal of Southern History* (August 1970): 350–67.
 17. Dixon, *The Leopard’s Spots*, 45.
 18. Jacqueline Jones, *Soldiers of Light and Love: Northern Teachers and Georgia Blacks, 1865–1873* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980), 82; Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (1971; reprint., Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1995); George C. Rable, *But There Was No Peace: The Role of Violence in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984); Blum, *Reforging the White Republic*, 77–80.
 19. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic*, ch. 2.
 20. Swint, *The Northern Teacher in the South*, 12; Willard Range, *The Rise and Progress of Negro Colleges in Georgia, 1865–1949* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1951); James M. McPherson, “White Liberals and Black Power in Negro Education, 1865–1915,” *The American Historical Review* (June 1970): 1257–1386; I. G. Penn, *Afro-American Press and its Editors* (Springfield, MA: Willey & Company Publishers, 1891); Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Modern Library),

- 35, 57; Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 11; Stephanie J. Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and Do: Black Professional Women Workers during the Jim Crow Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 20. Education also served as an important stepping-stone to economic and class advancement in other postemancipation societies. See Walter Rodney, *A History of the Guyanese Working People, 1881–1905* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), 115–17; and Robert Conrad, *The Destruction of Brazilian Slavery, 1850–1888* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 158.
21. For statistics, see Elizabeth Hyde Botome, *First Days Amongst the Contrabands* (1893; reprint, New York: Arno Press and the *New York Times*, 1968), 286; and Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought*, 328.
22. For illiteracy in the Caribbean, see Eric Williams, *The Negro in the Caribbean* (Washington, DC: Associates in Negro Folk Education, 1942), 71–73. For information on literacy rates in other nations, see Antonio Viñao Frago, “The History of Literacy in Spain: Evolution, Traits, and Questions,” *History of Education Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Winter 1990): 586; Harvey J. Gruff, *The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Culture and Society* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 299, 361–66. In postemancipation societies, including Trinidad, Haiti, and British Guiana, literacy rates of freedpeople and their descendents remained well behind those in the United States. As late as the 1930s Haiti’s Afro-Caribbean literacy rate stood under 20 percent, whereas literacy in Trinidad was under 60 percent. But even compared to more economically sound European nations like Spain and Italy, the advance of African American education was astonishing. In 1860 about 25 percent of Spain’s citizens were literate; by 1900, that rate had increased only to 37 percent. In Italy, literacy rates stood at about 31 percent in 1871; by 1901, they had increased to 52 percent. The improvement in African American literacy, in short, was nothing short of remarkable. It stood as a testament to the desire of people of color in the United States to obtain educational advancement and to the commitment of northern relief organizations and missionaries.
23. Botome, *First Days Amongst the Contrabands*, 286.
24. Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church during the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1982); Shaw, *What a Woman Ought to Be and Do*; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*.

25. Quoted in Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 11.
26. Quoted in Corey, *A History of the Richmond Theological Seminary*, 162.
27. J. G. Whittier, “Howard at Atlanta,” *Atlantic Monthly* 23, no. 137 (March 1869) 367–68.
28. Albion Tourgée, *Bricks Without Straw* (1880; reprt., Ridgewood, NJ: Gregg Press, 1967), 133.
29. Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought: The Nadir, 1877–1901* (New York: Dial Press, 1954), 328.
30. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward An Autobiography of a Race Concept* (1940; reprt., New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 24.
31. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Authoritative Text, Contents, Criticism*, (1903; reprt., eds. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1999, 1903), 69.
32. W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *John Brown* (1909; reprt., New York: International Publishers, 1962), 7–8.
33. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911, A. C. McClurg & Co.; reprt., New York: Harlem Moon, 2004), 14–15.
34. Quoted in Edward J. Robinson, *To Save My Race From Abuse: The Life of Samuel Robert Cassius* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 19.
35. Quoted in Augustus Field Beard, *A Crusade of Brotherhood* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1909), 321–22.
36. H. L. Proctor, *A Living Fountain* (New York: American Missionary Association, n.d.), 1–3. See also Logan, *The Negro in American Life and Thought*, 328.
37. Booker T. Washington, *Up From Slavery: An Autobiography* (1900; reprt., Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948), 62.
38. Quoted in Jane Dailey, *Before Jim Crow: The Politics of Race in Postemancipation Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 23.
39. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 69.
40. See Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois, American Prophet*, chs. 2, 3, and 4.
41. Quoted in Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 3.
42. Peter P. Hinks, ed., *David Walker’s Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (1829; reprt., University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000).
43. Kenneth S. Greenberg, ed., *The Confessions of Nat Turner and Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996), 47–48.

44. Clifton H. Johnson, ed., *God Struck Me Dead*. For other analyses of the interviews in *God Struck Me Dead* or uses of their narratives, see Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830–1900*, 72–80; Alonzo Johnson, “Pray’s House Spirit’: The Institutional Structure and Spiritual Core of an African American Folk Tradition,” in *‘Ain’t Gonna Lay My ‘Ligion Down’’: African American Religion in the South*, eds. Alonzo Johnson and Paul T. Jersild (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 8–38; Jocelynn Moody, *Sentimental Confessions: Spiritual Narratives of Nineteenth-Century African American Women* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 153–70. For more on images of Christ among African Americans of the early twentieth century, see Edward J. Blum, “A Subversive Savior: Manhood and African American Images of Christ in the Early Twentieth-Century South,” in *Southern Masculinities*, ed. Craig T. Friend (Athens: University of Georgia Press, forthcoming 2009).
45. For a discussion of the uses of the WPA narratives, see Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830–1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 113–16.
46. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 59.
47. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 109.
48. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 168.
49. Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois, American Prophet*, ch. 4; David Morgan, *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus*.
50. Interestingly, visions of Christ from common folk in the American colonial period seemed to be dominated by visions of “light,” rather than whiteness. See Susan Juster, *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). For more on the association of whiteness and godliness and African American assaults upon it, see Blum, *Reforging the White Republic*; Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois*; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms: Social and Literary Manipulations of a Religious Myth* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982), 68–85.
51. Henry McNeal Turner, “God is a Negro,” *Voice of Mission* (1 February 1898) in *Respect Black: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner*, ed. Edwin S. Redkey (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971), 176–77.
52. Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men*.
53. Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind*, ch. 5.
54. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 63, 143, 148.
55. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 91.

56. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 96.
57. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 101.
58. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 145.
59. On church segregation, see Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided By Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
60. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 16.
61. Johnson, *God Struck Me Dead*, 83.
62. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*; William Courtland Johnson, "Trickster on Trial: The Morality of the Brer Rabbit Tales," in *"Ain't Gonna Lay My 'Ligion Down,"* 52-71.

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