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**Appropriating the Prophetic Visions of Du Bois and Thurman:  
Considerations for the Academy**

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The African American prophetic tradition includes critiques of various forms of institutional, structural, and societal injustice and oppression. In the 1800s, the prophetic witness of Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vessey, and Nat Turner organized and mobilized many enslaved Africans to revolt against the evils of slavery.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, African American “sheroes” have played invaluable leadership and prophetic roles in the struggle for racial uplift and

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<sup>1</sup> Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Revised and enlarged. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983).

empowerment. Ranging from such notables as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Anna Julia Cooper, Maria Stewart, Ida B. Wells, Mary McCleod Bethune, Nannie H. Burroughs, and Fannie Lou Hamer, these women dared to imagine a world that affirmed their humanity.<sup>2</sup> Like their male counterparts, Black females have labored as agents in the church, and in society to envision a world free from the terrors of racism and social oppression.

Unlike the women and men previously mentioned, W. E. B. Du Bois (1868-1963) is considered a scholar-activist who was able to describe Black life in a way that spoke critically and cosmologically in his double-consciousness theory and ethic. After being the first Black person to receive a doctoral degree from Harvard, Du Bois published his now classic text *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) which categorically affirmed the humanity and divinity of the enslaved, displaced African. In his ability to critique racial and social injustice, and to see, to name a world within and beyond the divisive, alienating reality of race places him in the African American prophetic tradition. Moreover, Du Bois' multidisciplinary theory and praxis helped to open the eyes of a generation of scholars across various disciplines including theologian Howard Thurman (1899-1981) and sociologist of religion C. Eric Lincoln (1924-2000).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, American Academy of Religion Academy Series, no. 60 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); and *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Marcia Y. Riggs, ed., *Can I Get a Witness? Prophetic Religious Voices of African American Women: An Anthology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997); Cheryl Townsend-Gilkes, ed., *If It Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001); Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Dolan Hubbard, ed., *The Souls of Black Folk: One Hundred Years Later* (Columbia, Missouri, The University of Missouri Press, 2003); Reiland Rabaka, *Du Bois's Dialectics: Black Radical Politics and the Reconstruction of Critical Social Theory* (Lanham, MD: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2010).

In this article, I explore the transracial dynamics of Du Bois' vision found within his double-consciousness theory and take seriously the psycho-social complexity and impact of racism and symbolic whiteness without reifying the scientific fallacy of race. First, the essay discusses Du Bois' vision in the context of Lincoln and Mamiya's landmark study *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (1990).<sup>4</sup> Next, an extensive discussion of Thurman's reinterpretation of the religion of Jesus is presented that provides Christian spiritual and religious resources to engage contemporary manifestations of racism and white supremacy. Then, the essay synchronizes the thought of Du Bois and Thurman to accentuate integral facets of what I consider to be prophetic response within and beyond racial identity politics. Finally, the essay concludes with a brief reflection on Du Bois and Thurman for the academy. My hope is to nurture, inspire, and engage present and future generations of scholar-activists who prophetically denounce the evils of the legacy of slavery, colonialism, Jim Crowism, and new contemporary manifestations thereof while also announcing life, and an unequivocal surrender to GOD whom I experience as the Creator and Sustainer of life.

### **Du Bois' Influence on Lincoln and Mamiya**

C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya's *The Black Church in the African American Experience* is an extensive, comprehensive sociological analysis of the most independent institution in African American culture. They provided the field of sociology of religion with a sound, robust sociological framework to interpret the phenomenon of African American religious

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<sup>4</sup> C. Eric Lincoln, and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

experience. In their privileging of Black experience through religiosity, they unveiled the distinctive characteristics of the sacred and potent institution known as the Black Church. Furthermore, they debunked the myth of cultural bankruptcy of African American religion, or mere borrowing from White, Euro-American Christianity. The significant contribution of Lincoln and Mamiya can not be denied.

Standing on the shoulders of Du Bois, they contend,

The dialectical model of the Black Church is reflective of W. E. B. Du Bois's phenomenology of consciousness, his poetic articulation of 'double-consciousness' as summarizing both the plight and potential of the African and Euro-American heritage of black people; 'two struggling souls within one dark body.' Du Bois did not provide any final resolution of this double-consciousness, but he did recognize the need for complete freedom for African Americans in order that their human potentials could be fully realized.<sup>5</sup>

Lincoln and Mamiya's appropriation of the double-consciousness for the Black Church exposes the negative, oppressive conditions of Black life while also exploring the redemptive possibilities that are unique to this religious institution. However, in my opinion, Du Bois does provide a resolve within his double-consciousness theoretical paradigm. Du Bois' double-consciousness theory points to a way beyond the dialectic or two-ness that entails a synthesis of sort. Moreover, this synthesis includes the healing and participation of both the oppressed and oppressor in addressing "the problem of the color line" towards the humanizing of one and all. In short, in carefully examining Du Bois's double-consciousness theory, there exists an inherent spirituality, one that refuses to acquiesce to racial injustice and oppression while simultaneously being aware of and asserting one's humanity.

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<sup>5</sup> Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*, p. 16.

Many are familiar with Du Bois' poignant articulation of the two-souls within the dark body of the African American because it has been cited on numerous occasions. For those who have not seen or heard of Du Bois' analysis of the hybrid and liminal existence of African Americans, here it is.

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world – a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, 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 looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, -- an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>6</sup>

In his description, identity crisis and conflict abound as Du Bois names the struggle of the Black soul to affirm her humanity in the midst of the hostile, disdainful gaze of and by White counterparts. However, ironically, Du Bois also points to the stamina, the fortitude of the Negro as she is cognizant of her hybridity while maintaining a sense of unity. In this vein, Du Bois intimates that the duality within African American life and experience does not necessarily qualify as a psychological pathology. The fact that one is able to recognize one's humanity on one hand, and the constant attack of one's humanity on the other hand, makes an emphatic statement for life. One is not torn apart by mere acknowledgement of one's reality of having to negotiate and navigate dehumanizing forces, powers, and practices. For Du Bois, as will be presented more clearly later, this recognition is the path to becoming more fully human.

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<sup>6</sup> Du Bois, *Souls*, pp. 2-3.

Interestingly, Du Bois mentions the two-ness experienced by African Americans as being on two different trajectories with no hope of reconciliation. This observation suggests that Du Bois does not see a resolve beyond this conflict and crisis. However, he later shares his hope of moving beyond the contradiction of two-ness when he asserts,

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife (the double-consciousness),--this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that the Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face.<sup>7</sup>

In this less familiar quote of Du Bois, some could argue that it is the precursor to Martin Luther King's integrationalist, political ideology with the theological vision of the Beloved Community. More specifically, connections can be made to the excerpt from King's "I Have a Dream" speech that refers to being judged by the content of one's character and not the color of one's skin.

While there may be some correlations, what Du Bois says sixty years earlier is that one's humanity or sense of self is inextricably grounded in culture, national origin and reality, and not necessarily race. In short, where King may have inadvertently decontextualized persons of a darker hued skin, Du Bois does just the opposite. Notice how Du Bois discusses the American Negro as one who possesses a soul that was perceived to be exclusive to Euro-American Christianity during the writing of *Souls*.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, the American Negro, according to Du Bois,

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<sup>7</sup> Du Bois, *Souls*, p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Edward J. Blum, *W. E. B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), pp. 13, 15.

sees the value of America in spite of its atrocious practices of colonization, slavery, and segregation. This ability to see the beauty within speaks volumes to a strong sense of culture already present within the American Negro. In other words, to self-identify as both American and Negro with the potential to Africanize America but resisting the temptation to do so clearly places the American Negro as a civilized being with a past, present, and hope for a nonracialized future in the United States.

On another level of contextualization, Du Bois discourages the American Negro from self-abnegation or the erasure of one's Negro soul. He is convinced that both Africa and America have something of substance to offer, and American Negroes can more readily contribute to civilization if psychosocial barriers were removed to allow greater access for them to do so.

Du Bois' vision of becoming more fully human presupposes both an awareness of and yet a nonconforming to the White gaze.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Wolfenstein employs Ange-Marie Hancock's reference to Hannah Arendt's notion of the 'conscious pariah' by stating "such individuals, aware of their outcast status, simultaneously base themselves in it and struggle against the exclusions that define it."<sup>10</sup> For Wolfenstein, Du Bois is one who is keenly aware of his outside status as a 'conscious pariah,' and thereby works to negate the status of the negation. In short, for Du Bois, the double-consciousness or twoness is both a problem and potential

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<sup>9</sup> Eugene Victor Wolfenstein, *A Gift of the Spirit: Reading The Souls of Black Folk* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 12, 25.

<sup>10</sup> Wolfenstein, *A Gift of the Spirit*, p. xi.

solution.<sup>11</sup> The dark soul must carry the burden of the misrecognition of self in order to become a truer, integrated self. If not, the problem of the color line maintains its destructive power over racialized bodies, souls, and relations.

This Du Boisean understanding of transcending the problem of the color line is not an easy psychosocial task. On one hand, it assumes that the problem of the color line is not necessarily a static or fixed problem. The manifestations and social constructions of race during Du Bois' time are similar to yet different from today. Therefore, the challenges of being aware of the changing complexity, construction, and manifestation of race today requires a persevering spirit and experience of healing to remain engaged in negating the negation. On the other hand, it implies that there is no such thing as ontological Blackness or Whiteness or Redness or Yellowness or Brownness. Racial pride that reifies a scientific fallacy must be relinquished in favor of an ontology that grounds and affirms one's humanity. Like Du Bois, Howard Thurman points the way to a psychosocial and spiritual ontology that assists in the recovery of one's humanity for those who seek to acknowledge and transcend the problem of the color line.

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<sup>11</sup> Wolfenstein, *A Gift of the Spirit*, pp. 23-26.



## Thurman's Spirituality of Resistance

Where Du Bois places emphasis on negating the negation, Thurman draws attention to the analysis and development of an interiority of the disinherited<sup>12</sup> that facilitates in helping her to determine her destiny even in the midst of multiple levels of oppression and displacement.<sup>13</sup> Examining one's attitude towards the oppressor is essential for Thurman. If one does not deal properly with this question or until one does, he contends that "he cannot inform his environment with reference to his own life, whatever may be his preparation or pretensions."<sup>14</sup> In being acted upon while simultaneously acting on and in one's milieu is reminiscent of Du Bois' struggle of becoming a truer self. Thurman unequivocally asserts that the denial of either the oppressor or one's oppression renders the disinherited to a perpetual state of subjugation and non self-actualization.

In drawing on the religion of Jesus, Thurman notes how Jesus, a member of a disinherited group under Roman domination, "recognized fully that out of the heart are the issues of life and that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it

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<sup>12</sup> In light of the overuse and misuse of terms such as "disinherited," "oppressed," and "poor," I will offer a brief explanation of Thurman's understanding of the "disinherited." Thurman understood the disinherited in both specific and non-ontological ways. A person or group is disinherited if they lack social, political, and economic status and resources to act on their environment with creativity and dignity due to the oppression and suppression by another person or group. Hence, as an African American in the 20th century, due to race and racism, Thurman considered himself to be a member of a disinherited group. Moreover, he considered Jesus of Nazareth and the Jews to be disinherited, too, in light of Roman social, political, and economic control and suppression. However, for Thurman, the socially, politically, and economically disinherited can look to religious and spiritual resources in order to act on their environment in ways that engage and transcend the disinherited, oppressive material status. In his reinterpretation of Jesus and Christianity, Thurman discovered how to move within and beyond "the problem of the color line" as a human with creativity and dignity.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Nashville, TN: Abindgon Press, 1949, reprint, Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 23.

does not first win the victory of the spirit against them.”<sup>15</sup> Thurman raises two significant points with this declarative insight. First, the heart as the reservoir of ultimate meaning constitutes one’s center and sense of self that does not have to acquiesce to the stultifying realities of political and social disenfranchisement and humiliation. Second, this constitutive element of the humanity of the disinherited must express itself in a way that does not internalize the values of the oppressive domination system. Hence, twin hallmarks of Thurman’s interpretation of the religion of Jesus are resistance to the devastating blows of social oppression while also externalizing one’s humanity.

Resistance for Thurman is “the physical, overt expression of an inner attitude” (p. 26). Although he articulates the role of armed resistance in the psyche of the disinherited and during Jesus’ day as a form of resistance, he asserts that this was not the way of Jesus. Instead, in the midst of suffering, domination, and humiliation under the Roman imperial regime, Jesus proclaims that “the Kingdom of Heaven is in us.”<sup>16</sup> This is no sign of naiveté or a private religious remedy for coping with existential questions of life and death. Rather, it represents what Thurman calls an “authentic realism.”<sup>17</sup> In essence, Jesus was clear that the assertion of the Kingdom as a form of resistance was the first step to protecting one’s inner life because internal landscapes and capacities, and not merely external forces, determined one’s destiny. Within first century Palestine, according to Thurman, “it seems clear that Jesus understood the anatomy of the relationship between his people and the Romans, and he interpreted that relationship against

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<sup>15</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 21.

<sup>16</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 28.

the background of the profoundest ethical insight of his own religious faith as he had found it in the heart of the prophets of Israel.”<sup>18</sup> In this vein, Jesus points the way beyond racial degradation and dehumanization. Furthermore, Du Bois’ deep yearnings of becoming an integrated, truer self are articulated in Thurman’s recovery and reinterpretation of Jesus as one who exemplifies an ethic both within and beyond a dialectical of inherited and disinherited, oppressed and oppressor.

In a persuasive and provocative manner, Thurman asserts:

The basic fact is that Christianity as it was born in the mind of this Jewish teacher and thinker appears as a technique of survival for the oppressed. That it became, through the intervening years, a religion of the powerful and dominant, used sometimes as an instrument of oppression, must not tempt us into believing that it was thus in the mind and life of Jesus. ‘In him was life; and the life was the light of men.’ Wherever his spirit appears, the oppressed gather fresh courage; for he announced the good news that fear, hypocrisy, and hatred, the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited, need have no dominion over them.<sup>19</sup>

Jesus proposed values and an ensuing ethic that did not comply with the rules, borders, and orders of the domination system. In many instances, he was an outlaw to unjust laws that negated life for him and the masses of his people. He consistently crossed gender, ethnic, class, ability, age lines, and other barriers that challenged the status quo. Consequently, he was able to project a deeper vision of human relations that invited the disinherited to participate as social agents and determiners of their destinies. As actors according to values of a different realm than Caesar’s—the kingdom of God, they disrupted the death dealing blows inflicted by the Roman Empire.

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<sup>18</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 29.

The concept of the kingdom of God has many different theological connotations. Thurman's interpretation of the phrase within the religion of Jesus carried the meaning of the presence and power of God abiding within a person that contributed to the development of one's interior structures to engage the world as subject. Sociologists Bryant and Henry refer to Thurman's reference of the inner presence as "*a priori* residue of God-meaning"<sup>20</sup> that is integral to helping one find one's ground of being from the Source of being. Hence, for Thurman, there is something of God in every person. Furthermore, it was this constituting self and God relationship that represented "the ultimate key to a full and unshakable experience of oneself as a human."<sup>21</sup>

Jesus, according to Thurman, "projected a dream, the logic of which would give to all the needful security"<sup>22</sup> in the midst of civil insecurity and Roman domination. In short, Jesus' individual ethical engagement had social implications for both the disinherited and inherited. Jesus challenged them to adhere to the following ethical imperatives:

You must abandon your fear of each other and fear only God. You must not indulge in any deception or dishonesty, even to save your lives. Your words must be Yea—Nay; anything else is evil. Hatred is destructive to hated and hater alike. Love your enemy, that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> James Bryant, and Paget Henry, "From the Pattern to Being: Africana Phenomenology and Howard Thurman," *6<sup>th</sup> Annual Phenomenology Roundtable Meeting* (June 2006), Temple University, p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Bryant and Henry, "From Pattern to Being," p. 6.

<sup>22</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, p. 35.

The nature of the relationship between Roman and Jew would be transformed as the Jewish masses began to act accordingly. The power to heal and be healed rested first and foremost within the disinherited.

Here, in Thurman's interpretation and appropriation of Jesus, one sees the integration of spiritual matters with pressing social, existential issues. The kingdom of God as an internal spiritual presence is employed to address issues concerning life and death. For Thurman, like Du Bois, it was the problem of race. There was no bifurcation between the sacred and secular. Hence, when Thurman was advised by his white male professor in seminary not to concern himself with the transitory nature of social ills because his creative energy and brilliance could be far better spent on universal matters of the human spirit, Thurman "pondered the meaning of his words, and wondered what kind of response I [Thurman] could make to this man who did not know that a man and his black skin must face the 'timeless issues of the human spirit' together."<sup>24</sup>

Thurman engaged the spiritual and social by nurturing a self amidst the brutal forces of segregation, and the sad reality of how Christianity in the U.S. had become raced instead of Christianizing race.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Bryant and Henry (2006) note, "he focused his religious praxis on attempts at creating integrated sacred canopies in which ritually produced experiences of oneness in the Spirit would lift individuals beyond the socially inherited differences."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> Bryant and Henry, "From Pattern to Being," p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Bryant and Henry, "From Pattern to Being," pp. 3-4.

## Learning from Du Bois and Thurman: Coping, Creating, and Self-Constituting

The brief overview of Du Bois and Thurman does not do justice to their life's work and contribution. Nevertheless, what they exposed in their response to being racialized is a key to informing and nurturing a prophetic imagination at the intersection of race, religion, and spirituality. We will review their contribution in this section in the context of psychological and sociological strategies in response to race.

Du Bois described the problem of the color-line at the beginning of the twentieth century that asserted the humanity and cosmological worldview of emancipated Africans in the U.S.<sup>27</sup> In declaring that Black folks had souls with access into the metaphysical world like their White counterparts claimed, Du Bois entered a discourse to which he was not invited. In the process, he unveiled physical and metaphysical realities and possibilities by explicating “the spiritual world in which ten thousand thousand Americans live and strive.”<sup>28</sup> The descriptive eloquence in which he spoke of the sorrow and pain while also hope and healing assisted in the reconstituting of the Black self in engaging the problem of the color-line. The depth and breadth of his insight suggests that the *Souls of Black Folk* is both autobiographical and sociological.<sup>29</sup>

In his phenomenological description of Black life, Du Bois encouraged his African American readers to bear the burden of the double-consciousness. According to Wolfenstein, “he [Du Bois] surrenders neither side of his cultural identity, but rather engages in the struggle to lift the Veil that renders them contradictory—to solve through social and political action the problem

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<sup>27</sup> Blum, *Du Bois: American Prophet*, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. xxxi.

<sup>29</sup> Wolfenstein, *A Gift of the Spirit*, 2007.

of the color-line” (p. 9). Here, Wolfenstein follows Du Bois’ capitalization of the term “Veil” and he [Wolfenstein] understands Du Bois to be using it to refer to “the barrier of stereotypical beliefs and oppressive practices that splits or dirempts the historical and social space of African American life” (p. 8). If the “Veil” is understood accordingly alongside Du Bois’ desire to retain both cultural identities, it is safe to say that, ontologically speaking, there is no inherent contradiction between the African and United States of American cultural identities and expressions. Who each person is as human, as self is more than the respective constructed identities. Moreover, the two-ness, duality, or hybridity was not the psychological pathology, but rather the establishment of the Veil— the horizontal and invisible line of demarcation that rendered Black Africans in the U.S. as inferior while severely limiting their access to becoming more fully human. Those who construct and abide by the scientific and social fallacy reify the ideology of White supremacy, and thereby fall prey to the illusion. Du Bois projected a new vision of what constitutes being and becoming human that could not be accomplished unless one bore the burden of the double-consciousness towards cultural integration, and the removal of the veil.

For many, bearing the burden of the double-consciousness may be too much or just clearly illogical. What good outcomes or life affirming coping behaviors can emerge from such a stance? The other two alternatives, assimilation and radical isolation, are deemed by Du Bois as being insufficient in addressing the problem of the color-line.<sup>30</sup> The former ethical response to the reality of the veil suppressed one’s Negro self to survive on the unfortunate terms of White

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<sup>30</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 143-145.

supremacy, and the latter emerged as a result of “playing the game” according to the rules but still finding oneself excluded and dismissed. According to Du Bois, feelings of anger, bitterness, and rage brewed within these dark souls that could easily lead to violent retaliation, and the expression of revolt or revenge.<sup>31</sup> Denouncing both revolt and revenge and the insufficiency of these ethical responses in addressing the problem of the color-line, Du Bois challenged African Americans towards a more peaceful, protracted response in hopes of contributing to the symbolic death of the veil.

The suffering that ensues to either resist or acquiesce to the problem of race is no small thing. In an endeavor to put the veil to rest, the symbolic death of the Black cultural self must be resurrected and healed. Thurman (1965) in *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* poignantly described the nature of what we call symbolic death in this lengthy quote.

The real evil of segregation is the imposition of self-rejection! It settles upon the individual a status which announces to all and sundry that he is of limited worth as a human being. It rings him round with a circle of shame and humiliation. It binds his children with a climate of no-accountness as a part of their earliest experience of the self. Thus it renders them cripples, often for the length and breadth of their days. And for this there is no forgiveness, only atonement. And only God can judge of what that atonement consists. What does it mean to grow up with a cheap self-estimate? There is a sentence I copied many years ago, the source of which I have forgotten: “We were despised so long at last we despised ourselves.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, pp. 144-145.

<sup>32</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), p. 24.



Falling prey to the internalization of systemic degradation is tragic yet extremely difficult to avoid. The victim becomes the victimizer that perpetuates the reification of the veil. Yet, for Thurman, in the religion of Jesus, he found a ground of hope.

As stated above, Thurman challenged the disinherited to explore one's attitude towards the oppressor. Implementing a pre-Freirean (1970, 1973) dialogical pedagogical process, Thurman problematized the problem of the color line in *Jesus and the Disinherited*. This was significant, because it allowed space for a critical analysis of one's available options in response to one's oppressor. African Americans were invited to view themselves as actors, as participants with an interior instead of being merely objectified as encoded objects. Although the violent force of oppression loomed large, it was not the final or sole predictor of one's destiny. There was an option of a more excellent way.

One particular implication of Thurman's spirituality of resistance was that once the disinherited responded accordingly to the oppressive structures and systems, the inherited would also have an opportunity to experience their humanity. As King proclaimed, "human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted,"<sup>33</sup> Thurman, too, understood Jesus to be creatively maladjusted to the Roman Empire, and was able to externalize something from deep within that disrupted the oppressed-oppressor unhealthy, dehumanizing dialectic. In the moments and movements of disorientation, the oppressor is exposed and is thereby challenged to either resist one's privileged position that is based on a scientific fallacy or continue to acquiesce to the socially constructed reality.

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 27.

On many levels, Thurman redeemed Christianity in the U.S. for those who had ears to hear, eyes to see, and courage to really walk as Jesus walked. The colonizing, segregating, lynching, and disenfranchising practices of those who claimed Jesus as the Christ presented a religion that had no apparent “good news” for the socially marginalized. Bryant and Henry assert “Thurman saw the Christian canopy as a severely damaged one that was incapable of giving to its members (particular its black members) the unshakable experiences of themselves as human beings.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, when asked by a gentleman from India, who believed Thurman to be a traitor to all dark-skinned people of the earth, about his visit as a delegate in the name of Christianity, here is part of his response “I think the religion of Jesus in its true genius offers me a promising way to work through the conflicts of a disordered world.”<sup>35</sup> Thurman continued by stating, “I make a careful distinction between Christianity and the religion of Jesus. . . . From my investigation and study, the religion of Jesus projected a creative solution to the pressing problem of survival for the minority of which He was a part in the Greco-Roman.”<sup>36</sup>

Unfortunately, many Christians in the U.S. had betrayed its founder, Jesus, according to Thurman. The recovery of the religion of Jesus for Thurman enabled him, and those Civil Rights leaders in the 1960’s that he mentored to participate in the Spirit of a movement that empowered and affirmed, and transformed and inspired. Non-violent resistance as a continuity of the religion of Jesus and restoration of institutional Christianity provided a balm for the social,

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<sup>34</sup> Bryant and Henry, “From Pattern to Being,” p. 2.

<sup>35</sup> Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, p. 114.

<sup>36</sup> Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, p. 114.

political, and economic disinherited, and thereby challenged the inherited to relinquish power that dehumanized self and others.

Thurman, like Du Bois, envisioned a world where racial politics do not hold sway over social relations and human development. As each became increasingly aware of this painful reality, they found creative responses to retain and affirm their identities as humans first and foremost. Second, cultural integration for Du Bois and spiritual oneness for Thurman through non-violent resistance constituted the core of their psychosocial ethical aims. Third, both men saw within and beyond the veil, and therefore attempted to live out in the mundane what they had experienced as seers or prophets. In their respective fields and contexts, they lived, educated, lectured, prayed, and published ever mindful of who they were and what the nation could become in the here-and-now.

Though it is commonly known of Thurman's training and identity as a mystic,<sup>37</sup> recent works on Du Bois are beginning to acknowledge his prophetic and spiritual insight too.<sup>38</sup> In the end, the wisdom of their prophetic visions encourage us to remember that the dialectical tension concerning race is to be seen as a contradiction to be resolved, or an injustice to be removed, but never as a phenomenon to be eternally embraced. Their prophetic visions and practices disrupted the religious and social status quo of their day, and emboldened many in and throughout time to dismiss and denounce so-called divine ordinances such as race and racism.

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<sup>37</sup> Thurman, *With Head and Heart*, 1979; Luther E. Smith, *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1981).

<sup>38</sup> Blum, *Du Bois: American Prophet*, 2007; Wolfenstein, *A Gift of the Spirit*, 2007; Edward J. Blum, "The Soul of W. E. B. Du Bois," *Philosophia Africana* 7/2 (March 2004).

## **A Christian Prophetic Spirituality**

As an African American Christian female in the academy, I have appropriated Du Bois and Thurman in my prophetic spirituality. In negotiating of race they have provided me with an interpretive lens to name the ways in which racial politics stultify and dehumanize victims and, conscious and unconscious victimizers. Both scholars offer affirming, life-giving responses to oppressive and repressive constructs of race. The nuanced differences exist, and now I briefly examine them within the context of the academy to highlight their relevance for today.

In short, I consider Du Bois' prophetic vision to be a contingency model of engaging race matters, and Thurman's prophetic vision to be a non-contingency model. When I consider Du Bois' double-consciousness theory and praxis for the academy, I am encouraged to make meaning of the suffering imposed by the negative, dehumanizing gaze of white individuals and white-led institutions. I cannot become comfortable with the racialized structures, policies, and practices that would keep me alienated from self and others. In a similar vein, Martin Luther King, Jr., encouraged his audience to become "transformed nonconformist."<sup>39</sup> The oppressive racist system must not be ignored, rationalized away, or assimilated into. Hence, in my resistance and transformed nonconformist identity, I raise questions about the legitimacy of the system. Consequently, I invite my white sisters and brothers who are participating in and privileging from the racist system to choose to die to the system of race power and privilege, or not. If they choose to die, I have won my white sisters and brothers over, and have gained new

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<sup>39</sup> King, *Strength to Love*, p. 21.

allies in the removal of the barrier of race. For my white sisters and brothers who choose not to die, they continue to exacerbate the racist state, and the work continues because I, in my black skin, am still subject to disdain.

Unlike Du Bois, Thurman has provided me with the interior resources to bear burden of the double-consciousness because Thurman prophetic vision is a non-contingency model. Although in *Jesus and the Disinherited* Thurman invites the disinherited person to assess one's attitude towards the oppressor, it is done to provide access into my interiority. As part of at least two disinherited groups (African American and women) in the academy, I must assume responsibility for the way I respond to the oppressor(s). The temptations of fear, deception, and hate must not dictate my response because they do not represent the interior life and practice of the religion of Jesus. Once I find, and nurture, my sense of power within as Jesus did in his statement that the kingdom of God is within, I can then experience a deepening sense of freedom and agency regardless of the persistence of the problem of the color line in the academy. In the process, I stand internally ready to encounter God and the God within my oppressor when the external opportunity presents itself. Moreover, I announce my humanity that does not conform to a racist ideology, and thereby participate in the nurturing of my prophetic witness and identity.

## **Conclusion**

Du Bois and Thurman will remain as pivotal prophetic visionaries whether or not the problem of the color line persists. Their rich, theoretical praxis fund creative, redemptive responses that point beyond the debilitating effects of the ever changing concept of race. For

those of us who choose life instead of death, hope instead of despair, wholeness instead of fragmentation, and community instead of alienation, may we continue to announce a new way of being human within and beyond racial identity politics, and invite others to do the same.

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