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Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility

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Ashon T. Crawley
*Blackpentecostal Breath:
The Aesthetics of Possibility*
New York: Fordham University Press,
2017. 320 pp.

Ashon T. Crawley's path-breaking monograph troubles disciplinary boundaries, braiding together performance theory, queer theory, sound studies, literary theory, theological studies, and continental philosophy to make room for "Black Study." Like the aesthetic practices it examines, *Blackpentecostal Breath* rebels against the alleged coherence of theology's and philosophy's intellectual silos, freeing the "radical potentiality of the object[s] of study" (15). Each of the project's foci—testifying, tarrying, shouting, whooping, and speaking in tongues—is a formative feature of "Blackpentecostalism," which the author defines as "a social, musical, intellectual form of otherwise life, predicated upon the necessity of ongoing otherwise possibilities" (6). As this provocative definition suggests, there is much to be learned from the Crawley's portmanteau *Blackpentecostal*: its refusal to bifurcate mutually constitutive categories—in this case, "blackness" and "pentecostalism"—enunciates the book's fundamental critique.

Crawley's resistance to academic categorical distinctions flows from evidence that the effects of these distinctions have not only been "academic." Through their alliances with racial forms of categorization, many conventional modes of intellection have contorted their objects of inquiry and repressed various vulnerable groups of people. In contrast, Black Study disrupts "the epistemology, the theology-philosophy, that produces a

world, a set of protocols, wherein black flesh cannot easily breathe" (3). This subversive hermeneutic is consonant with Crawley's view that "black social life has been the constant emergence of abolition as the grounding of its existence, the refusal of violence and violation as a way of life, as quotidian. Black social life, to be precise, is an abolitionist politic, it is the ongoing 'no,' a black disbelief in the conditions under which we are told we must endure" (6). Black Study, then, is an "otherwise" method, a "mode of intense, spiritual, communal intellectual practice and meditative performance" (8).

In *Blackpentecostal Breath*, Crawley enacts the aforementioned ethic, moving with aplomb across media—art, sound, text—and forms—fiction, autobiography, theology-philosophy, and analysis—to illuminate the possibilities to which Blackpentecostal aesthetic practice gives expression. In Chapter 1, he uses the homiletic practice of "whooping" to theorize "breath" as both the fundamental animating force in Blackpentecostalism and the unruly excess that is missing from conventional approaches to pneumatology. Chapter 2 turns to the genre of ecstatic movement known as "shouting," arguing that this performance of moving flesh resists distinctions between "choreosonic" elements, yielding a critique of spatio-temporal coherence and the "aversions to blackness" endemic to Calvinist theology and Enlightenment philosophy. Chapter 3, "Noise," hears in the joyful cacophony

produced in moments of “testifying” and “tarrying” a critique of racial capitalism and teleological concepts of history. Chapter 4, “Tongues,” uses debates about the ethics of ecstatic speech, glossolalia, and xenolalia to resist liberal concepts of subjectivity and canonical arrangements of knowledge in the university, reasserting the need for Black Study. In the coda, a Blackpentecostal instrument, the Hammond B-3 organ, becomes a site from which to explore the nature of being-in-the-collective, which produces a kind of “nothing music,” an idiom that is no less productive than breath.

One of the book’s central contributions is a nuanced approach to questions of authorship and history—a genealogical method that promises to illuminate the fraught politics of origins that animates many sacred traditions. While careful to note that the book is not a history of Pentecostalism in the twentieth century, Crawley argues against a canonical origin story for Blackpentecostalism, proposing that this “multiracial, multiclass, multinational Christian sect...finds *one strand of its genesis* in 1906 Los Angeles, California” (4, italics added). In so doing, he contends that figures including William Seymour, Charles Parham, and Lucy Farrow and places like Los Angeles’s Azusa Street “lived into” the “energetic field” of practices that circulated well “before they were called Blackpentecostal, before a group cohered on Bonnie Brae Street for prayer in April 1906” (7). Instead of history, then, *Blackpentecostal Breath* pursues rhizomatic lineages in the conviction that “performance constitutes a tradition” (8).

By taking aesthetic practices seriously, this book invites music scholars to think, not just about what performances and idioms mirror or contradict, but also

about what they produce, to consider the material of sound as the substance of faith. Crawley’s engagement with musical sound is exemplary—both accessible and affective. Although he does not describe himself as a musicologist, Crawley’s practical experience with the material is apparent in his descriptive vignettes, such as this brief discussion of the popular praise chorus *Yes, Lord*:

This word, this “yes,” chanted seven times, descending up and down the scale to the key’s resolve only to begin again. Then a break, from “yes” to “yes, lord.” Punctuating the chant are hand claps, are the sounds of the bass and snare drum, of the cymbals, of Saints praising noise-like together.” (161–62)

Crawley’s elevation of practice over canonical notions of belief offers a model for detailing the beauty found in traditions that do not consistently celebrate the beauty of all lives without ignoring that inconsistency. Against the injunctions that work to limit the openness of many Blackpentecostal communities, Crawley argues that “something is *there*, in the aesthetic practices, aesthetic practices that *are* collective intellectual performances, that serve as antagonistic to the very doctrines of sin and flesh that so proliferate within the world” (24). The critique might be said to imagine, not a new Pentecostalism, but an otherwise Pentecostalism, one generated from the materiality of the culture.

Blackpentecostal Breath also contributes a model for thinking about musical collectives. Pushing back against philosophical preoccupations with solitary subjectivities, theological fascinations with individual belief, and musicological fixations on singular voices, Crawley pursues an “extra-subjective” sociality that is defined

by openness. This “egalitarian mode of spirit” constitutes a robustly choral kind of musicking, one shaped by the book’s focus on breath, which is the condition of possibility for all Blackpentecostal aesthetic practices. Crawley’s close reading of a sermon by minister and singer Dorinda Clark-Cole highlights both her virtuosic preaching and the kinds of community that sustained the performance. Clark-Cole’s sermon

produced the sonic space as discontinuous and open, open to the other voices that both preceded her moment of being overcome with Spirit—such that other women gathered around, held and hugged her—and extended the preacherly moment by sociality, through opening up and diffusing the very grounds for the concept of preaching, for listening, for breathing. They all in that space breathed the same air, the same irreducibly impure admixture: Clark-Cole gave it, they received it, they gave it, she received it. (45)

The analysis uses the common source of breath to trouble the ascriptive logic of production, clarifying this paradigmatic performance’s activation of Blackpentecostalism’s potential energy.

If I were to ask more of this monograph, it would be to reflect at greater length on its own practice of Black Study. For example, what are other methodological analogues to concepts like choreosonicity? Addressing such questions would make Crawley’s insights even more actionable in work with the commingled topics of race and place, gender and sexuality, music and movement, visuality and aurality that confront scholars of religious music. As it stands, however, the book’s manifold strengths make it well worth the effort it requires of its readers. *Blackpentecostal Breath* is full of dense, artful phrases and rich with paragraphs that weave together a startling array of disciplines and modes of writing. Readers may well discover that it productively performs the disruptions it describes.

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