Mystery Matters
*Embodiment and African American Mystics*

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Introduction

If esotericism as a concept shifts meanings over time and involves dynamics of construction and personal projection (and which of our concepts do not?), we nevertheless use this term, at least in part, to mark modes of knowing and experiencing that have been rejected by dominant traditions. And we may certainly deem African American mysticisms as modern mysticism’s rejected, or nearly completely unattended, other. “If the first three-quarters of the twentieth-century discourse on mysticism,” writes Jeffrey J. Kripal, “was dominated by perennialist language and the last quarter by epistemological questions and constructivist (essentially Kantian) commitments,” then perhaps, he suggests, what we require is a third turn, “…this one to the mystical body as a real body, indeed as a variable set of bodies.” This turn would involve studying “real suffering, real desires, real skin…as some of the deepest structuring principles of mystical literature and their interpretation” (Kripal 2003, 596).

With rich and varied examinations of power and gender, many scholars have moved in just these directions (e.g. Jantzen 1996, Hollywood 2002, and Boesel and Keller 2009). Yet, African American embodied mysticisms remain understudied.

“Scholars have neglected,” Alton B. Pollard points out, “the mystical flowering of the African Diaspora” (Pollard 2009, 3). As a working definition of mysticism, Pollard helpfully offers the following: “Mysticism is a generic term for intimate discourse and practices that speak to what it means to be human in relationship to the transcendent and the mundane” (Pollard 2009, 4). Along these lines, this essay seeks to correct the neglect of African American mysticisms through comparing those of Howard Thurman and Langston Hughes, the former more exoteric and transcendent focused, the latter more esoteric and mundane. For Thurman, the mystery of life involves a mystical relation with the transcendent as found in the spirituals, whereas for Hughes it roots us more in the earthiness of the blues. Both, however, suggest that the study of Africana mystics requires an emphasis on embodiment. Embodied and visceral, yet preceding and exceeding bodily limitation, a mystery exists between Thurman’s Spirituals and Hughes’s Blues that reveals a both/and, neither/nor,
a/theistic aspect to much African American religious experience. Moreover, our analysis of embodied African American mysticisms will illuminate the (in) capacities we share with nonliving matter, and how this matters.

In putting the mystical in relation to the poet Langston Hughes, I do not mean that he deemed himself to have experienced the salvific power of the Christian God, or any God, per say. Rather, I simultaneously seek, on the one hand, to extend the term beyond its usual evocations of a sense of a presence of something transcendent in order to show its usefulness for understanding mundane material as well, and, on the other hand, to problematize any ultimately neat or final distinctions between the transcendent and the immanent. As with any such duality, the very thought of one activates the other. What is interesting for our purposes is the way the interplay between mystical and mundane may generate a “more” regardless of any final theistic or atheistic import.

By invoking the more here I mean less to conjure the ghost of William James than to place us in the context of African American religion according to Anthony B. Pinn, who argues that, “black religion at its core is the quest for complex subjectivity, a desire or feeling for more life meaning.” Explaining religion as a response to identity crisis, Pinn says, “In some ways, this may be described as a form of mystical experience, a type of transforming experience that speaks to a deeper reality, guided perhaps by a form of esoteric knowledge,” but the most important defining feature is “this yearning for complex subjectivity” (Pinn 2003, 173). I first began reading Thurman and Hughes as supplements for each other nearly twenty years ago when I was doing youth ministry in an Episcopal church in Texas then attended by Karl Rove. Concerned about how so many congregants could take comfort in a Heavenly salvation yet remain apolitical and unconcerned about the suffering of the oppressed, I worried about how an emphasis on a transcendent hereafter anesthetized efforts at transformation in the here and now (very good).

Thus, I listened when James Cone said, “If whites were really serious about their radicalism in regard to the black revolution and its theological implications in America, they would keep silent and take instructions from blacks” (Cone 1986, 62). One has only to read the essays at the end of the twentieth anniversary edition of A Black Theology of Liberation, however, to know that Cone himself gains from listening to others. I thus began cultivating the discipline, which still informs my scholarship today, of listening for and to others: listening for others means striving to hear what or who may have been missed or marginalized, while listening to others means giving power and authority to those marginalized voices and allowing them to transform prior misconceptions. As much as possible, then, I would read Thurman to the