I learned a lot reading Ashon T. Crawley’s book *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*. I learned about the subversive, destabilizing, dynamic, and beautiful expression of faith that is Blackpentecostalism. I learned how the liturgical practice of the African American (and African descended) worshipping community simultaneously evokes histories of oppression, mutual solidarity, and visions of hope. And I learned that, by giving readers insight into a deep and thriving spirituality that may have been unknown to us, Crawley has given Christians from any persuasion a great gift. Crawley fluently navigates between theology, aesthetics, post-colonial studies, queer theory, and political philosophy to offer us a vision of what constitutes and drives Blackpentecostal spirituality.

In Blackpentecostal Breath, Crawley examines the oratory aesthetics of Blackpentecostalism (the Pentecostal tradition comprised primarily of African Americans) in order to understand how, through embodied liturgical practices, African Americans release *Blackness* into the world. “Blackness,” a term used in Black Study, is a subversive force that unsettles “… the institutionalization and abstraction of thought that produces the categorical distinctions of disciplinary knowledge” (3). Black Study is an interdisciplinary study that critically examines the Black experience by parsing out the historical, cultural, political, and economic conditions that shape the life and culture of the African diaspora. Blackness is posited as a compulsory disruption to despotic epistemologies that suppress marginalized voices. Because of the American struggle for racial civility, Black flesh “cannot easily breathe” in its social dimensions (3), which incites the subversion of Blackness. Moreover, Blackpentecostalism is the multiracial, multiclass, and multinational Christian movement that traces back to the Azusa Street Revival led by William Seymour in 1906 (4). Crawley describes Blackpentecostalism as “… an intellectual practice grounded in the fact of the flesh, the flesh unbounded and liberative, flesh as vibrational and always on the move” (4). Crawley seeks to evaluate the aesthetics of Blackpentecostalism in order to show how its performative embodied practices criticize the normative theology and philosophy of the dominant oppressive culture of the West.

The main way Blackpentecostalism subverts the “violent world” of Western thought is by “… being beside oneself in the service of the other” (5). Blackpentecostalism’s main task is thus to bring people into an “unbroken circle” that together stands against the oppressive forces of dominance. Vocal and perfor-

**Ashon T. Crawley**  
mative acts, such as singing, noise making, whooping, shouting, and tongues speech, are ways that Blackpentecostals resist and critique the normative theological and philosophical thought of the West (7). Orality narrates comprehensive understandings of the way in which the world works, and the witness of vocal performative acts helps shape a community’s shared image of a given state of being.

Blackpentecostal orality begins with breathing, or “black pneuma” (38). Breathing is integral for a narrative performance because it recounts what goes unremarked in an oral retelling (34–36). Air, breath, and breathing disrupt the normative settlement by announcing a person’s existence to the world, which shows that the person is alive although marginalized and displaced (34–35). The breath of divinity operating in the flesh works towards sanctification, both in the individual and in the social context. As such, the Spirit works against prejudice and segregation of any sort (39). When discussing vocal performances, a few characteristics of Blackpentecostalism that I found particularly intriguing were “whooping,” “shouting,” and tongues speech.

“Whooping” occurs in a sermon during the end of a worship service as a deep and intense mode of improvisation. It is a celebratory and proclamatory mode of delivery that borders between speaking and singing, almost like an opera. The preacher uses rhythmic and melodic almost chant-like phrasing, which “... invites congregants to intense performances of deep antiphony as celebration” (42). The congregation responds with jubilance. It is the silence—the breath—the space between the whooping that allows the utterances to be so dramatically felt (44). In this way, Crawley says whooping aestheticizes breath, foregrounding the flesh by the intentional respiration (46–47). Breathing flesh accentuates the necessity for openness towards God and the other (59).

The flesh is also involved in “choreosonic” practices like “shouting.” Crawley refers to the “choreosonic” as a juxtaposition of “... the always attendant and interconnected concept of movement and sound” (93). In other words, choreosonic gestures see vocal utterances working in tangent with, and not merely as a response to, physical jerks and bodily movement. “Shouting,” in the context of Blackpentecostalism is not merely a loud call, but a spiritually induced practice of spontaneous uncontrolled dance. Worshippers shuffle quickly with hands shaking, clapping, or raised in an obvious embodied expression of jubilance. The music during the shout is quick paced with climbing chromatic bass lines and snare hits on every upbeat. The piano accentuates the beat with a counter rhythm, and the organ plays jazzy seven chords. Shouting derived historically by slaves from Afro-indigenous and Afro-Islamic backgrounds (91–92). As it was adopted into the worship context, shouting became