

Article

Black Religious Studies, Misogynoir, and the Matter of Breonna Taylor's Death

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Abstract: This article reflects on the matter of state-sanctioned death in Black religious studies, with the murder of Breonna Taylor as its central focus. It examines how scholars of Black religion engage with the issues of state-sanctioned murder, antiblackness, and misogynoir, and it endeavors to underscore ways for Black male* scholars of Black religion to respond to the religious experiences and deaths of Black women and Black people of all gendered experiences. This article's central claim is that if Black male* scholars of Black religion continue to underscore how Black religion has been a catalyst for Black liberation without attention to how cisheteropatriarchy functions as antiblackness, then we ultimately will be unable to speak the name of Breonna Taylor in earnest.

Keywords: Breonna Taylor; antiblackness; death; Afropessimism; gender; Black men; Black religion



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1. Introduction

The police killed Breonna Taylor, a Black emergency medical technician, in her sleep at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—a global crisis that has disproportionately affected Black and other communities of color. Officers fired 10 rounds from outside of Taylor's home, as she sought rest between shifts. Indeed, there is no rest for the weary. This article situates this act of violence at its center, and considers the quotidian matrix of antiblackness, necropolitics, and misogynoir in the corpus of Black religious studies in response to the murder of Breonna Taylor by Louisville police officers. Taylor's death—and the deaths of Black women and Black people everywhere—are and should be of principal concern to scholars of Black religion. By situating the importance of revaluing Black women's lives, this article examines the conjoined relationship between the killing of Black women in the public sphere and the dismantling of Black male heteropatriarchal power in Black religious institutions and in Black religious studies scholarship. To do so, this article makes the following moves: I begin by thinking about the place of state-sanctioned death and archives of state-sanctioned murder in Black religious history, Black feminist studies, and Black Studies. Then, I move into a discussion about the literal and metaphorical deaths of Black women in Black religious institutions—namely, within Black Protestant and Protestant-adjacent churches. Finally, I use two examples—in Black Theology and African American religious history, respectively—to think about the masculinist ethos that has historically and contemporaneously remained constant in Black religious studies as a way of calling upon Black male scholars of Black religion to adequately respond to the precarious experiences of Black women and all Black genders.

In the latter section, I am particularly attentive to political theorist Joy James' caution, "Although black males are most publicly policed, imprisoned, and executed by state violence and vigilantism, and remembering to call out the names or images of their female counterparts is an important additive in a black death roll call and mobilization, this lens is shaped by paternal power, imagery, and desires" (James 2016, p. 256). This article takes serious James' warning and, rather than simply call for us to #SayHerName—that is, Breonna Taylor's name, and the names of Black women—it instead calls upon Black male scholars of Black religion to do the work to value Black women's lives, and to take seriously

the matter of Black women's deaths in the study of Black religion. Indeed, this article argues that there is connective tissue between the scholarly disregard for Black women's lives and contributions to Black religious institutions, and the violence that Black women experience in both the private and public spheres—from home, to church, to mosque, to the University, and everywhere between and beyond. If Black male scholars of Black religion continue to underscore how Black religion has been a catalyst for Black liberation without attention to how cisheteropatriarchy functions as antiblackness, then we ultimately will be unable to speak the name of Breonna Taylor in earnest.

2. Death, Dying, and Black Religion

Breonna Taylor's untimely death and the subsequent commemorations of her life at the Greater Friendship Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky confirm that the deaths of Black people have religious implications, and the repetitious deaths of Black people, on constant loop, are certainly contended with by Black people using religious ritual and ceremony (please see, for example, [Holloway 2002](#); [Young 2007](#); [Smith 2010](#); [Manigault-Bryant 2014](#); [Sharpe 2016](#)). Religious studies scholar Joseph Winters recently argued that “to re-say the name of Breonna Taylor is to participate in a ritual of conjuring and mourning, to be a witness to the afterlife of black death. Mourning exists at the edge of being and nonbeing, presence, and absence. Mourning occurs within the remains and hauntings. And the insistence on ‘saying her name’, not unlike performing a die-in, becomes a way to experience the intimacy between (social) death and life” ([Winters 2020](#), p. 3). Winters confirms what we know to be true: Black people's religions constitute worlds beyond this one, and those religions are utilized in the service of living in and trying to survive this antiblack world, while actively refusing this world, and vowing to not become of it.

To do so, Black people use spiritual technologies to cast down and denounce white supremacist machinations that call on white people and their accomplices to kill Black people as human sacrifices to the god of white supremacy ([Mathews 2008](#); [Cone 2011](#)). Black religions contend with antiblackness even when antiblack practices and theologies persist in the spaces of Black churches and other Black religious institutions. The Black feminist poet June Jordan noted in 1971, “We lead the world stubbornly down the road to Damascus knowing, as we do, that this time we must name our god. This time, gods will grow from the graveyard and the groin of our experience. There will be no skyborne imagery, no holy labels slapped around our wrists. Now we arise, alert, determining, and new among ourselves” ([Jordan 1971](#), p. 29). Indeed, Black religions, and the gods and deities at the helm of these religions, “grow from the graveyard”. The graveyards that hold the Black dead are the grounds upon which our multifaceted religious traditions stand, and the Black dead guide the living as “copresences” on our tedious journeys; ancestors keeping watch from within that “great cloud of witnesses”, conspiring on our behalf and making intercessions for us ([Manigault-Bryant 2014](#); [Beliso-De Jesús 2015](#); [Otero 2020](#)).

Without question, as ancestor June Jordan helps us to understand, Black death is all over the corpus of Black religious history—from the Transatlantic slave trade to the present day. Black churches, mosques, botanicas, and homes have historically been surveilled and terrorized by the state, the Klan, the police, and vigilantes. Thus, Black religious people know well what it means for their Black homes and religious institutions to be violated. Breonna Taylor's murder—in her home—like so many other murders of Black people by police—whose funerals would later be held in Black churches, and whose names would be spoken again and again by the faithful—confirms the pervasiveness of Black death and Black people's coping with it. The bodies bear the score, and those souls left behind preserve the memories. The murder of Earl Little—Baptist lay preacher and Universal Negro Improvement Association leader—in Omaha, Nebraska by the Klan; the rape of Recy Taylor by six white men outside of a Holiness church in Abbeville, Alabama; the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Alabama; the bombing of the home of the religious group MOVE in Philadelphia; and the lynching of so many whose names Ida B. Wells-Barnett, the Civil Rights Congress, and the National Association for the Advancement

of Colored Peoples worked so hard to document. Black death is all over Black religious history; Black death *is* religious history. Black people's dying, funeralizing, and eulogizing are religious, encompassing a wide array of African-derived rituals.

Breonna Taylor's death, and the accompanying commemoration of her life, are a part of this long genealogy of honoring the dead who have died "not having received the promises but having seen them afar off" (Hebrews 11:13). This nation of lying tongues and false witnesses has promised Black people so many things—emancipation chief among them; but, as Saidiya Hartman reminds us in her tour-de-force *Scenes of Subjection*, we are yet forced to contend with "the nonevent of emancipation insinuated by the perpetuation of the plantation system and the refiguration of subjection" (Hartman 1997, p. 116). Breonna Taylor's death, like so many other Black women's deaths at the hands of the police, is an example of the plantation's reconfiguration in the afterlife of chattel slavery. Taylor's home, like the slave cabin, was invaded by neo-slave catchers known today as the police. Black folk culture has long suggested that "sleep is the cousin of death", and as surely as those prophets long told us, Taylor, like Fred Hampton and Aiyanna Stanley-Jones, was murdered in her sleep. However, it bears pondering whether our prophets ever foresaw that the police would eventually become the arbiters of life and death, deifying themselves like the Jesus some of them sang about, who is yet rumored to return as "a thief in the night" (1 Thessalonians 5:2). On this note, Joy James again reminds us, "Off-continuum grief and suprarational demands to state authorities—'Resurrect the children you kill'—exceed the capacities of on-continuum politics" (James 2015). The state takes away Black life, but it does not have the power to give or to resurrect.

Thus, death permeates the Black experience and, hence, Black religions; and yet, the question remains whether scholars of Black religions have adequately contended with the matter of state-sanctioned Black death in the contemporary period (see, for example, Wilmore 1998; Douglas 2015; Evans 2020; Booker 2021). Other subfields within Black Studies tarry with this question. Black feminist scholar Jennifer Nash observes in *Black Feminism Reimagined*, for example, that "Black feminism is preoccupied with death". She goes on further, citing Afropessimism as the sole catalyst for "[making] black death the centerpiece of US black studies, where social movements like Black Lives Matter and Say Her Name have rendered visible the continued invisibility of black deaths, and where black feminists have continued to name mourning as 'the condition of black life'" (Nash 2019, p. 111). Nash's assessment of the field of Black feminist studies is certainly pointed, given the numbers of Black feminists who have explicitly criticized Afropessimism, or have distanced themselves from the theory and its theorists (see, for instance, Hortense Spillers' recent 2021 lecture series, "Afropessimism and Its Others").

In contrast, Black feminist Afropessimists such as Patrice D. Douglass remind us that Black feminism and Afropessimism converge for Black women such as Korryn Gaines, who was killed by the police in 2016, just four years before Breonna Taylor. She contends, "Each is pessimistic about the explanatory power of gender to confront the entrails of Black gender that are 'not at all gender-related gender-specific'. Each offering an unflinching analysis of the world that rendered her vulnerability absolute, the world she resisted, and the world that misunderstood and failed her" (Douglass 2018, pp. 118–19). Douglass' "Black Feminist Theory for the Dead and Dying" challenges reductionist characterizations of Afropessimism that suggest that the theory does not offer an analysis of Black gender and cisheteropatriarchy, and she also models for us the Black feminism of Afropessimism through her pen and her own homage to Korryn Gaines. Indeed, Douglass writes while drawing upon the work of Saidiya Hartman and Hortense Spillers, "The afterlife of slavery breeds the necessity to remember Black women, like Korryn, so she is not held as collateral damage of an articulation of gender that theorizes her into a void" (Douglass 2018, p. 119). Bearing in mind the stark contrast between Nash's and Douglass' characterization of Black feminist studies, Nash's observation that Black feminists are preoccupied with death not only raises questions about the place of death and dying in Black feminist studies and Black Studies, respectively, but also, as this Special Issue elucidates, it queries the place of

state-sanctioned death in Black religious studies. “O, death where is thy sting?”. Indeed, are scholars of Black religion preoccupied with death, and if so, whose deaths are the subject of this preoccupation?

For a long time, Black religious studies scholars have been entranced with and wedded to Christian hegemony and cisheterosexism, such that Jesus Christ, and all presumably straight-identifying men killed by the state, are deemed movement martyrs, while the deaths of Black women, queer, transgender, and gender-nonconforming people are met with troubling silence. To be clear, no Black person killed by the state is a martyr, and the call for Black women to be martyred like Black men evidences how the state and its accomplices often commodify and utilize the Black dead in the service of their own liberal fictions and fantasies. The call for martyrdom, as Delores S. Williams reminds us, is never in the best interest of Black women’s liberation (Williams 2013). I build upon Williams to suggest that it is also not unlike the use of Black women’s services in religious institutions while they are alive, and the simultaneous disregard of Black women’s roles as parishioners, clergypersons, leaders, healers, church founders, and funders (Best 2006; Butler 2007; Casselberry 2017). It is a fact, and Black women scholars—especially Black feminists and womanists—confirm it, that Black women keep Black religious institutions like the Nation of Islam open, and yet those same institutions often fail to honor Black women in life and speak Black women’s names when they die (Frederick 2003; Taylor 2017; Lomax 2018).

3. Black Women’s Death in Black Religious Institutions

Some Black religious institutions also literally kill Black women. A recent study shows that certain Christian denominations, often with theologically restrictive and socially conservative racial and sexual politics, have higher rates of hypertension among their Black women followers (Robbins et al. 2020). Black women have also faced sexual and intimate partner violence at the hands of Black male religious leaders (Hine 1989; Taylor 2017, pp. 192–94). Black men have also killed Black women inside of Black churches. Consider, for example, the assassination of Laura Adorkor Kofey, the founder of the African Universal Church, on 8 March 1928 in her pulpit in Miami, Florida by a Garveyite by the name of Maxwell Cook. Kofey had been a member of Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), and spent much of her time traveling throughout the country, evangelizing and spreading the good news of African Redemption (for more on Black religion and the UNIA, please see Burkett 1978a, 1978b). One member of the New Orleans Division of the UNIA recalled, “Lady Laura Kofey had been in [our] midst, hundreds have been added to [our] numbers” (*Negro World*, 12 February 1927). Garvey, however, became jealous of her growing prominence, and was especially bothered by how she brought to light some of Garvey’s suspicious leadership choices.

Like many Black women evangelists, Kofey traveled often to keep her enemies at bay. Her followers recounted in a pamphlet, “In the year 1926, the Spirit of her Old Man God then led her to move South by way of New Orleans, through Louisiana, Mississippi and on to Alabama. Making one-night stops in different towns on her way she made her mark and left an indelible impression still remembered by remnants to this day” (*The African Messenger*, undated, Box PS14, Robert A. Hill Collection, Duke University). In her travels, Kofey claimed to be raising funds for the Black Star Line and the UNIA, but had allegedly pocketed over USD 19,000 for herself during her southern tour of the United States. Although she visited Garvey in federal prison in Atlanta, Georgia and gained his support, as he learned of her problematic fundraising practices and misuse of her UNIA affiliation, in October and November 1927 the *Negro World* published notices to all UNIA divisions from Garvey that stated, “No Division or Chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association is to entertain one LAURA KOFEY, alias PRINCESS KOFEY and LADY KOFEY, who has for some time been collecting funds from members of the Association in the South under the guise of sending them to Africa, etc. Should she make further appeals, members should have her arrested for fraud” (*Negro World*, 22 October 1927; *Negro World*, 5 November 1927; *Negro World*, 12 November 1927). Garvey’s warnings

about Kofey reached members in the US, Central America, and the West Indies, and ultimately ruined her reputation, inciting a “witch” hunt. In the months following these public takedowns, Garvey would be deported from New Orleans by the US government, leaving Kofey to tend to the African Universal Church and her preaching tour.

However, not long after Garvey’s deportation, Cook, a Garveyite, would take the matter of “handling” Kofey into his own hands, killing her as she preached. Indeed, historian Keisha Blain has described Kofey’s assassination as a “extreme case [that] underscores the patriarchal ethos of the Garvey movement, which sought to limit the extent to which women could autonomously lead” (Blain 2018, p. 41). Historian Barbara Bair has similarly argued, “Death is the most effective means of censorship, of quieting a voice you do not want hear. Laura Adorker Kofey’s life is a metaphor for the dialectics of gender and religion that existed within the Garvey movement—both in the opportunities afforded her and, in the limitations, placed upon her when she overstepped the unspoken boundaries of what a woman in the movement should do and be” (Bair 1996, p. 59). Indeed, there is a long history of Black preaching women and non-men being forced into silence by Black clergymen and Black male religious leaders, and Kofey’s assassination is perhaps the most painful example (please see, for example, Lewin 2018; Sampson 2020). I raise this history to suggest that the killing of Breonna Taylor in her home is akin to the killing of Black women in religious institutions, and the resemblance between Black religious leaders and the police is worthy of critical scholarly consideration. How do Black religious institutions police Black women, and what does this policing reveal about the carceral and punitive ethos of these institutions? Moreover, how does the grammar of policing shape the study of Black religion? How do carceral logics undergird the disregard for Black women’s experiences? What cisheteropatriarchal imaginaries sit at the crux of how we narrate misogynoir and necropolitics in Black religious studies?

Placing Kofey’s assassination in her church almost a century ago in conversation with Taylor’s murder in her home in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic allows us to ultimately ponder these questions, and to see how Black religious institutions, and Black religious studies, have often struggled with collusion with empire—and by empire, I refer to systems of domination including but not limited to cisheteropatriarchy, antiblackness, and state-sanctioned murder. Recent scholarship by Sylvester Johnson and Lerone Martin, for example, has challenged us to reassess how we have narrated Black religious history given what we now know about the slave trade, FBI informants, and other religious actors who have colluded with the state in the maintenance of policing and surveilling in Black communities (Johnson 2015; Martin 2018). Sitting with death in Black religious studies necessitates a critique of the state and the police, and it also necessitates an honest assessment of how some Black religious actors actively do the work of the state.

In the contemporary moment, political organizers have raised serious questions about the Reverend Al Sharpton, who confessed to working for the FBI as an informant, along with Ben Crump, an attorney who often “advocates” on the behalf the families of those killed by police, and other celebrity activists who “ambulance chase”. The most uncanny and troubling representation of their “activism” occurred in the aftermath of Breonna Taylor’s murder by way of an event called “BreonnaCon”, which used a ghost-like image of Taylor to bring together celebrities who championed their own personal brands and businesses. Many of the headliners—such as activist Tamika Mallory and *Real Housewives of Atlanta* star Porsha Williams—claimed to be bringing attention to Taylor’s murder, but local Louisville organizers and many others across the country accused the event’s planners of being opportunistic, grifting, and capitalizing on Black death.

This would not be the first time these individuals and several others would be called to task for their “organizing”. Just recently, Samaria Rice—the mother of then-12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was killed by police in 2014—called out Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors, Mallory, Sharpton, Crump, and controversial activist and social media enthusiast Shaun King for grifting. In an interview with Professor Imani Perry entitled “Stop Hustling Black Death”, Rice confessed “They should not be standing on the front

line like this was they child [. . .] You supposed to be uplifting the family, the community, teaching us how to love on each other, not bickering and fighting about who gon' get the next case or who gon' be on TV next. It's a mess." (*The Cut*, 24 May 2021). While Breonna Taylor's family did not cite the same concerns as relates to BreonnaCon—in fact, Mallory claims that the family was involved in the planning—it is worth noting that many outside of the family questioned Mallory's and others' intentions, given previous and recent claims from other families and organizers about grifting (*Revolt*, 24 August 2020). Nevertheless, the lack of accountability between the families of victims killed by police and those organizers rallying on behalf of the deceased and their families—often without the families' express consent—seemed only to intensify in the aftermath of both Taylor's and George Floyd's murders during the pandemic summer of 2020.

The conflict between the aforementioned activists is not new, however, and mirrors so many other instances from previous movements. Ella Baker's critique of "Hero Worship" of black male ministers such as the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and their projections as "miracle performer[s]" stand as prophetic counsel (Ransby 2003, pp. 190–91). Baker's papers and speeches elucidate the ineffectiveness of "celebrity" within movements, and demonstrate how the Civil Rights Movement was sullied with an overbearing enthrallment with Black male patriarchs and their positionality in pulpits, the front of marches, and the face of community-organizing events and projects orchestrated by Black women. Baker exposed how "celebrity status" was "a product of a dominant culture that promoted individualism and egocentrism", in which celebrity caused "activists [to] often unwittingly replicate the values and attributes of those they [opposed]" (Ransby 2003, p. 191). The conflicts embedded in today's social movements reveal that the Black male minister is not the only representation of "Hero Worship", especially as women, queer people, and gender-nonconforming people fight over microphones and movement funds, and have been accused of grifting and hustling off of Black death. However, the pervasiveness of the Black male minister, thinker, intellectual performer, and organizer as charismatic hero should not be overlooked. In fact, his persistence pervades Black religious studies. He is often centralized over and against the Black women, queer, transgender, and gender-nonconforming persons in his orbit, whose labor and contributions are frequently discounted (please see, for example, Hopkins 2004; Best 2006; Johnson 2011; Lightsey 2015; Moultrie 2017; Lomax 2018; Greene-Hayes 2019; Turman 2019; Jones 2020).

4. Black Men*, Misogynoir, and the Study of Black Religion

Bearing this in mind, I want to use the remainder of this article to consider two phrases, and what they might reveal to us about Black men*, misogynoir, state-sanctioned death, and the study of Black religion. The first is found within Hortense Spillers' celebrated article, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book", in which she argues "It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of 'yes' to the 'female' within" (Spillers 1987, p. 80). The second, written by the poet Nayyirah Waheed, is a refrain that goes "all the women. in me. are tired". Spillers' proclamation and Waheed's confession taken together deeply move me towards honoring the Black women within my scholarly method—that is, within my lineage, within my work, within my political commitments, and here within this article and its attempt to think about Breonna Taylor's death in the context of Black religious studies. If, as Waheed proclaims, "all the women. in me. are tired", and if it is true that Black men* must say "'yes' to the 'female' within", as Spillers encourages, we must sit with that which exhausts Black women literally to death. Indeed, sitting with death in Black religious studies means honestly grappling with the ways in which the world exhausts Black women to the point of premature and untimely deaths. On this point, the clinical psychologist and public theologian Chanequa Walker-Barnes has written extensively on the medical implications and the burden of the "strong Black woman" (Walker-Barnes 2014). What would it mean for Black men* to carry our own loads? What would it mean for Black men* to care for ourselves and for all Black genders?

Spillers and Waheed's words incite these questions, and they also move me to use the asterisk (*) after "Black man" and "Black men" to signal that while many of us have been socialized as Black men, many of us are yet trying to free ourselves of the restrictive, and often violent, behaviors associated with cisheteropatriarchy. In the words of the Black gay poet Essex Hemphill, for instance, "I am eager to burn/this threadbare masculinity/this perpetual black suit/I have outgrown" (found in [Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001](#), p. 342). In what ways might the death of Breonna Taylor and the necropolitics of Black women's experiences in and beyond academia call upon Black men* to literally "burn this threadbare masculinity"? How might the study of Black religion engender practices and methods that do not render Breonna Taylor into a void, or silence Black women who call upon us to adequately speak her name? What might it look like for Black men* to speak Breonna Taylor's name and the names of Black women everywhere as the basis upon which we do our work? How might Black women's names take root in our citational practices? ([Smith et al. 2021](#)). These questions are invitations to other Black men* in the study of Black religion to take up the work of dismantling structures, systems, and practices that harm Black women and girls. Sitting with death—Breonna Taylor's death—in Black religious studies vis-à-vis these questions is to acknowledge the death-dealing practices at the helm of the academic study of religion. It is about admitting our inadequacies in telling the whole Black liberation story. It is about centering and amplifying the voices of Black women and girls in a society that incessantly tramples upon Black women.

Bearing this in mind, I turn now towards examining two examples—in Black Theology and African-American religious history, respectively—to think about the masculinist ethos that has historically and contemporaneously remained constant in Black religious studies, and I do so even while having deep appreciation for these works and these scholars' contributions to our field. One of them is from the Reverend Dr. James Cone, who wrote with righteous indignation and fiery rage in *Black Theology and Black Power*, following the Civil Rights Movement and the radical protests of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, "This work . . . is written with a definite attitude, the attitude of an angry Black man, disgusted with the oppression of Black people in America and with the scholarly demand to be 'objective' about it. Too many people have died, and too many are on the edge of death" ([Cone 1969](#), p. 2). Cone's theologizing of "Black Power"—first spoken by Stokely Carmichael in 1966—with a Black Christological lens fueled the fire burning within him, a Black male theologian, exhausted by white supremacy. Cone pondered, "What does the Christian gospel have to say to powerless Black men whose existence is threatened daily by the insidious tentacles of white power? Is there a message from Christ to the countless number of Blacks whose lives are smothered under white supremacy?" ([Cone 1969](#), p. 32). In the fifth chapter, he wrote "The task of Black Theology, then, is to analyze the Black man's condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding of Black dignity among Black people, and providing the necessary soul in that people, to destroy white racism" ([Cone 1969](#), p. 117).

Despite Cone's attention to "the suffering of Black people"—a term that echoes through the text and his corpus writ large—the synonymizing between "Black people" and "Black man" should not be overlooked. Indeed, Cone, who many would describe as a man of his times, presented a masculinist theology for Black people based on his fascinations with King and Malcolm X—one that seemingly only saw Black heterosexual men as suffering under white supremacy, structural racism, poverty, and global antiblackness ([Turman 2019](#)). Cone's Black Theology efficaciously utilized the political and sermonic rhetoric of the movement's male leaders and "African fathers" to theologize a pro-Black Christian orientation, which also further routinized what Erica Edwards describes as a "charismatic scenario" in the Black theological imagination, which "figure the precipitous appearance of charismatic spokesmen as the necessary climax in the political romance of the pageant [such that] the charismatic leader propels the romance of Black brotherhood forward" ([Edwards 2012](#), p. 47). In *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972), Cone similarly writes "In the spirituals, Black slaves combined the memory of their fathers with the Christian

gospel and created a style of existence that participated in their liberation from earthly balance" (Cone 1972, p. 30). The omission of "mothers" or foremothers undergirds the patriarchy of Black religious studies—both historiographically and contemporaneously.

However, in the decades following the release of *Black Theology and Black Power*, amidst a burgeoning feminist movement and a sexual revolution across the globe, Black women scholars, some of whom studied under Cone at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York, and many more in North America, Latin America, Asia, and Africa, began to identify as feminist and womanist theologians, biblical scholars, and ethicists (following the lead of Alice Walker's 1983 definition of "womanist"), and rightly critiqued the patriarchal, race man fixations of "Black Theology" and other Third World, Latin American, and African theologies.¹ In 1986, for instance, Delores S. Williams contended "The womanist theologian must search for the voices, actions, opinions, experience, and faith of women whose names sometimes slip into the male-centered rendering of Black history, but whose actual stories remain remote" (Williams 2006, p. 119).

In the more than 50 years since the advent of Cone's Black Theology and nearly 40 years since Williams' poignant words, Breonna Taylor's death and the silence concerning it among Black male* scholars of Black religion signals that Black women's names, experiences, and deaths still "slip into the male-centered rendering of Black history". A contemporary example of this phenomenon—and particularly, the silencing of Black women's voices and experiences in African-American religious history—can be found in Dennis Dickerson's *The African Methodist Episcopal Church: A History*, in which he privileges the denomination's male leaders, at the expense of Black women's contributions. Dickerson grounds his analysis of the AME Church using the Black Theology of James H. Cone and his brother, Cecil W. Cone—both having grown up in the AME Church—as a theoretical tool for understanding "the insurgent impulse of African Methodism" (Dickerson 2020, pp. 8–9, 16, 457–61). As I have noted elsewhere, Black women appear throughout the text, but they are simply referenced and not centered as pivotal to the development and multiple reconstructions of African Methodism over time. From Jarena Lee's prophetic ruminations about women's divine right to preach and Richard Allen's pushback to Lee's demands, to the wives of bishops carving out their own spaces to critique Black male ecclesial patriarchy, Black women are central to African Methodism (Greene-Hayes 2021).

Nevertheless, Dickerson draws heavily upon the masculinist discourse of Black Theology as a theoretical framework, and does so without comparable engagement with womanist theology, especially as many womanist scholars of religion have theologized and theorized the experiences of women in African-American religions—such as Jarena Lee—to make broader claims about and against Black male patriarchy in the church, the academy, and our global society (Dickerson 2020, pp. 10, 223; see, for example, Williams 2013, pp. 127–57). As the historian of African-American religions Judith Weisenfeld reminds us, "Remaining satisfied to add a few female figures alongside the men of the expected pantheon of major actors or to substitute a woman for a man to illustrate some aspect of the standard narrative is to miss the profound and significant challenges—both in the form of critique and of invitation to creativity—that feminist and women's studies can generate" (Weisenfeld 2013, p. 137). More to this point, Jarena Lee's *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee: Giving an Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel* (1849) stands as its own witness, full of poignant critique and analysis of African Methodism, gender, and ecclesial patriarchy during the long nineteenth century (Collier-Thomas 2010, pp. 23–29). Returning again and again to the writings of Black women and saying and re-saying the names of Black women—both dead and alive—is work that Black male* scholars of religion must do. It is, in the words of the Reverend Dr. Katie Geneva Canon, "the work our souls must have".

5. Conclusions

To truly and earnestly sit with Black death in Black religious studies, then, we must ask ourselves again and again a question Christina Sharpe gifted us: "How are we beholden

to and beholders of each other in ways that change across time and place and space and yet remain?" (Sharpe 2016, p. 101). Indeed, how is Black religious studies beholden to Breonna Taylor, and specifically, as this article asks, how are Black male* scholars of religion beholden to Breonna Taylor? In his examination of how Black religion (and thus, blackness) destabilizes the category of religion (and thus, the human), J. Kameron Carter recently invited us to think about Black feminism's "clarifying" work in relation to the scholarship of Charles H. Long, one of the field's leading Black male scholars of Black religion (Carter 2021, pp. 105–6). Carter's characterization of Black feminism, and specifically the Black feminism of Zakkiyah Iman Jackson, as having the ability to "clarify" the very schools of thought that often read Black women outside of them—such as the academic study of religion—is phrasing that, quite literally, jumps from the page (see Jackson 2020): Black feminism clarifies, as in, Black feminism clears the way; it sets things in order. Tamera Lomax describes this as "Black feminist religious thought" in that it "understands that black women's interpersonal needs, social conditions, rights, politics, religion, and spirituality have historically been bound up together and that wholeness requires individual and collective healing and transformation" (Lomax 2016, p. 31).

As we return to the "graveyard", then, as June Jordan lovingly encouraged, and we sit there, bearing witness to the untimely death of Breonna Taylor, let us listen for ancestral guidance, as commitment to and in solidarity with Black feminist religious thought, to effectively transform the field of Black religious studies. Indeed, Black male* scholars of religion can begin this work by revaluing Black women's and non-men's lives and experiences, raising them from the proverbial footnote (if they make it there) to the body of our collective scholarly concerns. Indeed, the body remembers, and as M. NourbeSe Philip reminds us, we are charged "to defend the dead", all of them (Philip 2008).

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Notes

- ¹ See canonical womanist theology, ethics, and biblical studies texts, such as: *Katie Geneva Cannon's Black Womanist Ethics* (1988), *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (1996), Jacquelyn Grant's *White Women's Christ, Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (1989), Delores S. Williams's *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (1993), and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If it Wasn't for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture In Church and Community* (2001). For an intellectual history of womanist theology, see, for example, Stephanie Mitchem's *Introducing Womanist Theology* (2002) and Nyasha Junior's *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation* (2015). For anthologies in womanist theology, see two edited volumes by Emilie M. Townes, *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (1993) and *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* (1996). For a mini-documentary on the founding of womanist theology at Union Theological Seminary, please see Anika Gibbins, "Journey to Liberation: The Legacy of Womanist Theology," 24 March 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjhtUGqFCWg> (accessed on 20 September 2019).

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