

Article

HIStory against the World: Religion, Black Iconicity, and the Haunting Stretcher Photos of Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur

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Abstract: This article examines how Michael Jackson's 1984 stretcher photo and Tupac Shakur's 1994 stretcher photo scrambles the disciplinary boundaries surrounding the academic study of religion. Drawing inspiration from Manning Marable's concept of *Blackwater*, this study explores the complexities of black iconicity's relationship to black suffering in the modern world. Through a critical analysis of the production and circulation of Jackson and Shakur's respective stretcher photos, the following account highlights the disruptive force of black iconicity in modern society, unraveling its implications for religious meaning. By tarrying with these haunting photographic representations, this article prompts a reevaluation of the relation between (anti)blackness, visual culture, religion, and popular culture.

Keywords: religion; African American religions; popular culture; visual culture; Michael Jackson; Tupac Shakur; Arthur Jafa; lived religion



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“A slave rebel laughs at the consciousness of the master and seeks a *fundamental redefinition of the known world.*”

—Manning Marable

1. Introduction

On 27 January 1984, Michael Jackson's ill-fated encounter with a pyrotechnics mishap at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles while filming a Pepsi commercial left him engulfed in flames, punctuating a horrifying consequence of technical negligence witnessed by over 3000 attending spectators. While engrossed in a performance of his chart-topping single “Billie Jean”, Jackson inadvertently strayed too close to an untimely pyrotechnics exhibition during the sixth take of the commercial shoot. The premature ignition of the pyrotechnics engulfed his head and patented sequined jacket in fire, resulting in severe second and third degree burns on his scalp, leading to the loss of a portion of his hair. While Jackson was being securely placed onto an emergency stretcher in preparation for ambulance transportation, paparazzo Alan Zanger seized the opportunity to capture a photo of the pained superstar. In the photo, Jackson can be seen waving his sequined glove while his head is wrapped in gauze and his eyes are closed. Despite being strapped to a stretcher with severe burns on his scalp, the agony Michael Jackson held within his body could not mask the fact that the flashing bulbs of the paparazzo, intertwined with the surveilling gaze of camera crews, reporters, and curious onlookers, necessitated a pained performance from one of the most visibilized icons of the twentieth century.

A decade later, on the night of 30 November 1994, the day before a jury would deliver a verdict that would sentence him to 18 months to 4.5 years in prison on two counts of sexual abuse for unwanted touching, rapper, actor, and son of Black Panther Afeni Shakur, Tupac Shakur, was robbed at gunpoint and shot five times in the lobby of Quad Recording

Studios in New York City. As paramedics ushered a restrained Shakur to Bellevue Hospital Center, New York Post photographer and retired New York City police detective Gary Miller captured a photo of Shakur throwing up his middle finger from the restraining stretcher immediately before entering the ambulance. Along with many aspects of that fateful night, the ambivalence surrounding the intended recipient of Shakur's middle-finger salute remains. Less than two years after Shakur's one finger salute from the stretcher, the haunted and haunting artist would be dead, the victim of another tragic act of gun violence in the United States of America.

Honoring the spirit of this special volume and historian Manning Marable's under-engaged text *Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class, Consciousness and Revolution*, this article aims to tarry with the haunting black iconicity codified within the stretcher photos of Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur, unraveling their destabilizing implications for disciplinary notions of the appropriate location for the academic study of religion. For Marable, Blackwater referred to a radical consciousness within black faith concerned with the immediate conditions of black people (Marable 1981, p. 40). According to Marable, "Blackwater is the consciousness of oppression, a *cultural* search for self-affirmation and authenticity. Blackwater was the dialectical quest for the pedagogy of liberation, the realization that human beings have the capacity through struggle to *remake their worldly conditions*. Thinking alongside Marable, this article invites an expansion of the concept of Blackwater, consciously moving away from tropes of heroism, fixed *sui generis* notions of religion, and traditional ideas of spectacular black performances that rely on masculinist interpretations of resistance. Thus, the following study refrains from claiming definitive knowledge of the artistic intent or "heroic resilience" behind the gestures captured in the stretcher photos of Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur. Instead, our focus shifts to the broader discourse surrounding the lives and deaths of both men, braiding the images of them on stretchers with the haunting codification of pained black iconicity within the context of the black study of religion in the United States of America (please see, for example, Carter 2023).

2. Conceptual Methodology

Within the black study of religion, scholars such as Tamura Lomax, Charles Long, Keri Day, Victor Anderson, Alisha Lola Jones, Ashon Crawley, and J. Kameron Carter (among many others) have developed pathbreaking conceptual methodologies anchored in a dedication to grapple with the haunting connection between black religion and black culture (please see, for example, Lomax 2018; Day 2022; Jones 2020; Long 1999; Crawley 2016; Anderson 1995; Carter 2023). By engaging with the complexities and paradoxes of black life, these scholars offer innovative approaches to the study of black religion that challenge disciplinary boundaries and conventional modes of analysis. Despite offering critiques of both the study of black religion and the discipline of black theology, what braids them together, methodologically, is a collective refusal to truncate the study of black religion within disciplinary borders. While religious studies departments often differentiate the academic study of religion as a "social-scientific" pursuit distinct from theological studies, these scholars have scrambled such distinctions with their groundbreaking conceptual methodologies. They recognize that the study of black religion is inherently intertwined with the critical study of black culture, black visibility, black political theology, and black theopoetics. The pathbreaking conceptual methodologies employed by these scholars affirm and embrace the constitutive imbrication of black religion, black culture, and black political theology. Their work breaks down the artificial boundaries of hostility that have traditionally separated these discursive modes of black inquiry. Through their respective scholarship, they invite us all to consider how any examination of the relationship between black visual culture, black popular culture, and black religious experiences necessitates a simultaneous exploration of black religion in the wake of its poetic, cultural, and improvisatory multiplicity.

Their intellectual labor thus creates the conditions of possibility that allow us to critically engage with the stretcher photos of Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur within the context of the black study of religion, broadly conceived. These iconic images, fraught with symbolic significance and capturing moments of pained vulnerability, become crucial entry points to explore the intersection of religion, culture, and visual representation within the broader context of black experiences. By foregrounding the following analysis within the broader murmur of black religious and cultural scholarship, we can delve deeper into the intricate dynamics and profound implications of these stretcher photos, ultimately gaining a deeper understanding of their cultural, political, and religious significance.

Alongside the conceptual methodologies of the scholars listed above, our investment in critically placing found images of Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur's stretcher photos in relation to the black study of religion is inspired by visual artist Arthur Jafa. Arthur Jafa is a groundbreaking artist, cinematographer, and filmmaker whose work has significantly influenced the realms of visual art and cinema. Jafa is renowned for his creative use of found images and footage, a methodology that involves compiling and repurposing pre-existing audiovisual and pictorial material to create new narratives and visual compositions. This process allows Jafa to draw from a diverse range of sources, including popular culture, historical footage, and personal archives, ultimately creating a mosaic of images that convey a quilted mode of haunted (and haunting) visual storytelling. Jafa's methodology of found images and footage serves as a form of bricolage, where he carefully selects and recontextualizes visual elements to challenge established narratives and traditional modes of representation. This approach disrupts the perceived boundaries between high and low culture, art and popular media, and challenges standardized definitions of what is considered religious or sacred material.

An example of Jafa's use of found footage can be seen in his critically acclaimed 2016 video installation titled *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*. This work brings together a montage of haunting, evocative, and emotionally charged images, ranging from archival footage of black religious services to iconic black artists to contemporary scenes of police brutality and terpsichorean expressions of black joy. By weaving these diverse visuals together, Jafa creates a visceral and lingering experience that reflects the complexities of black life and history, while also prompting profound meditation on themes of race, power, and spirituality in the United States.

Thinking alongside Jafa, this article engages with the stretcher photos of Jackson and Shakur in order to explore how the utilization of found images as a form of bricolage can disrupt disciplinary frameworks and expand our understanding of the interplay between black visibility and religion. By examining Jafa's innovative approach and engaging with his works, we can delve into the ways in which found images and footage can be employed to challenge, reimagine, and reframe traditional notions of religious material, meaning, and representation. Through the medium of found footage, Jafa challenges and expands normative definitions of what is considered "religion" and disrupts the fixed boundaries within which religious studies traditionally operates. Rather than confining religious activity to specific sacred spaces or established institutional frameworks, Jafa's methodology opens up new avenues for exploration. It reveals the potential for unpoliceable, Dadaesque modes of black spirituality to emerge from unexpected sources and sites, challenging preconceived notions of the proper locations for religious mediation, performance, and collective engagement. Jafa's chosen mode of artistic inquiry challenges the idea that religion is solely confined to sites explicitly indexed in discernable relation to formal religious institutions and encourages a braided engagement of where and how black spiritual practices and experiences manifest. Moreover, the use of found images and footage disrupts the conventional understanding of the proper location for religious archival material. It highlights the significance of material that may not have been initially perceived as religiously significant but can be repurposed to reveal new dimensions of religious meaning and practice. By embracing these non-traditional archival sources, Jafa's methodology expands the possibilities of examining religious dynamics and challenges the

disciplinary limitations of cultural and religious scholarship. In doing so, Jafa's approach not only expands but also subverts normative notions of what produces and constitutes "religion". It challenges the fixed boundaries and categories that confine religious studies to established frameworks, encouraging a more flexible and dynamic understanding of religious phenomena. This allows for a broader exploration of religious practices, experiences, and expressions that go beyond traditional definitions.

Turning now to the study's emphasis on the production of black iconicity in the United States, this work also takes up the pathbreaking scholarship of writer, curator, and critic Nicole Fleetwood and the rich conceptual resources she offers through her book *On Racial Icons: Blackness and the Public Imagination*. Regarding the braided relations existing between the figure of the black icon and what we identify as the invention of religion in the modern world, Fleetwood writes,

While the icon carries the trace of godlikeness, to render a subject as Black within various histories and discursive traditions means literally and symbolically to denigrate: to blacken, disparage, belittle. . . Racial iconicity hinges on a relationship between veneration and denigration and this twinning shapes the visual production and reception of Black American icons. The racial icon as both a venerated and denigrated figure serves a resonating function as a visual embodiment of American history and as proof of the supremacy of American democracy. (Fleetwood 2015, p. 8)

Building alongside these scholars and visual artists, our focus attenuates the signification and valuation of Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur's *pained black iconicity* and how the meaning that the national public attaches to them is haunted by the way blackness as an agonistic, interruptive force in the modern world, scrambles the terms of order suturing religious meaning. This article occasions the opportunity to think together about religion, race, nation, visibility, modernity, and U.S. public culture through these two iconic and haunting photographic representations. This article is specifically concerned with producing a close reading of the two images, a reading that, informed by Fleetwood's intervention, is concerned with the conditions of production and the historical context out of which images emerge, and pays attention to the images' circulation and reception in the public sphere during the final two decades of the twentieth century.

In the spirit of the bricolage methodological framework informing this study, the title of this article serves as a portmanteau symbolizing the interconnectedness of Jackson and Shakur's black lives, their art, struggles, and premature black deaths. The portmanteau is specifically drawn from Michael Jackson's album *HISTory: Past, Present, and Future, Book I* and Tupac Shakur's album *Me Against the World*, both of which were released months apart from each other in 1995. Despite being perceived as incommensurable producers of black popular culture, we engage with these two artists and their cultural productions as being constitutively imbricated in a broader discursive formation of black suffering, black striving, black iconicity, and black masculinities, unveiling the complex relationship between traumatized black icons, the visual culture that codified their suffering, and the modern world.

3. Experiencing Religion within the Burning, Buried American Guilt

A year after Michael Jackson's stretcher photo was taken, famed novelist, essayist, and cultural critic James Baldwin concluded his essay *Here Be Dragons* (originally titled, "*Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood*") with the following account of what he termed the Michael Jackson Cacophony:

The Michael Jackson cacophony is fascinating in that it is not about Jackson at all. I hope he has the good sense to know it and the good fortune to snatch his life out of the jaws of a carnivorous success. He will not swiftly be forgiven for having turned so many tables, for he damn sure grabbed the brass ring, and the man who broke the bank at Monte Carlo has nothing on Michael. All that noise

is about America, as the dishonest custodian of black life and wealth; the blacks, especially males, in America; and the burning, buried American guilt; and sex and sexual roles and sexual panic; money, success and despair. . . Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated—in the main, abominably—because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires. (Baldwin 1985)

By ending his essay with an account of the Michael Jackson Cacophony, Baldwin invites a radical reconceptualization of Michael Jackson's life within the matrix of black life and black study. The account of Michael Jackson we encounter on the last page of Baldwin's essay is not the dominant reading of Jackson that has managed the overwhelming majority of discourses concerning his life for nearly half a century. Baldwin's Jackson is not the universal, global, apolitical, deracinated King of Pop whose art, life, death, and ghostly afterlives are free from the haunting specter of antiblackness. No, the Jackson we encounter through Baldwin is not only black; his sequined blackness punctuates a haunting, a "burning, buried guilt" endemic to the nation that first necessitated his great and terrible invention in the first place. Baldwin asserts that this blackness that Michael worked with and against his entire life was too visceral, too haunting, and too tethered to the ever-present pall of black death for trite universalization.

Baldwin did not reveal whether or not he had seen Jackson's pained stretcher photo taken a year earlier. What his analysis of the Michael Jackson Cacophony does make clear, however, is that there can be no analysis of Jackson's stretcher photo that is not foregrounded by an account of "black life, black wealth" and what Baldwin termed the "burning, buried American guilt". For Baldwin, Michael Jackson's pained black iconicity occasioned the possibility for the United States to have a conversation, not about Jackson's status as an icon or a symbol of black promise or even a cautionary example of black disappointment. No, the Michael Jackson Cacophony and the stretcher photo that in many ways codified it became a nodal point whereby those living in the United States of America could have a haunting conversation about themselves and the nation. However, what is crucial for this study is that the Michael Jackson Cacophony codified in the stretcher photo and the controversy surrounding Jackson's wider black iconicity is anything but a secular affair.

On the surface, it would appear that the secularity of Jackson's stretcher photo is all but conclusive. After all, he was not burned in a house of worship dancing to a song about Jesus while wearing a bedazzled cross around his neck. Assembled around his stretcher were camera crews, paramedics, and gazing onlookers, not imams or nuns or individuals holding Buddhist prayer beads. There are no social-scientific means to "prove" that Jackson's sequined wave from the site of the stretcher held any inherent religious intent. Thus, ascribing any religiosity to Jackson's stretcher photo would seemingly require us to impute said religiosity upon Michael Jackson's pained body from our privileged position as scholars for the sole purpose of creating a set of issues to study, issues that otherwise simply would not exist. However, the black study of religion exists precisely because no account of black life or black popular culture can be reduced to what *appears* on blackened surfaces. In fact, we posit that to assume that the black icon found suffering from the site of the stretcher was a "secular" figure also requires a privileged imputation of categorical markers (namely the marking of secularity) that belie the ways his ambivalent frame, though captured by the flashing bulb of the paparazzo, refused to affirm the polarity of sacred and secular that is all-too-often taken for granted.

Thus, in order to render visible the relationship between the "burning, buried American guilt", the burning of Michael Jackson's head, and the black study of religion, a relationship we believe converges at the site of Jackson's pained wave from the stretcher, we must first offer a counter-reading that calls into question the assumed secularity of Michael Jackson's pained black iconicity. To be clear, countering the assumed secularity of Jackson's pained black iconicity does not mean that we are making the claim that everything Jackson said and did should be interpreted as "religious" within the formal, disciplinary

sense of term. Instead, we propose that the discourse surrounding Michael Jackson, i.e., the “Michael Jackson Cacophony”, often overlooks the critical fact that Jackson spent the first half of his life as a baptized Jehovah’s Witness actively involved in door-to-door proselytizing. What the Cacophony elides is Jackson’s fervent conviction that his black iconicity was a crucial part of a divine plan to literally save the world.¹ In light of this, we are not invested in studying the stretcher photo of Michael Jackson because we desire to produce an example of religion from an otherwise “secular” photo. We do so because the individual depicted in the image, a 25-year-old black man waving in pain with closed eyes, was not only a devout, Kingdom Hall-attending, proselytizing Witness of Jehovah God; he also maintained a strong conviction that he was charged with a divine assignment, even while flashing bulbs alighted his pained black body with a glow that never sought out his consent.

Anchoring his theological education primarily in the example and rigorous commitment to study embodied by his mother, Katherine Jackson, Little Michael Jackson was not only trained to embrace the enfreakment and strangeness that came with belonging to a religious community that, in the wake of World War II, was signified as seditious and un-American; from the earliest age, he was trained to *teach others* how to faithfully claim the significations of ghastly otherness that nations and their secular governments would inevitably project upon them. As a child, his house was not lit up during the holidays like other homes. Alongside his brothers, he remained seated as other kids stood to pledge allegiance to the United States flag and the United States government. Multiple times a week, he gathered with his mother and siblings to rigorously study the Watchtower literature that engaged topics as diverse as law and order, the problem of race, African decolonization movements, “proper” gender conduct, the climate, mass incarceration, warfare, economics, policing, and the soon-coming day of judgment. By the time we arrive at the pained image of Jackson waving from the stretcher, he was already a well-seasoned and baptized “pioneer” who, under a cloak of disguise, spent hours each week alongside his sister La Toya knocking on doors throughout Encino, California presenting a clear theological message to ordinary families about the problems of the world, the inefficacy of all secular governments, and how they might cope with the troubles they could not escape.

Due to the secularization of Jackson’s life and career, few are aware that Jackson spent the overwhelming majority of his youth and early adulthood simultaneously negotiating the staunchly theocratic world of the Witnesses *and* the heterodoxical, insurgent black sociality permeating the domain of popular culture. Without a sufficient account of nine-year-old Michael navigating the contradiction between Kingdom Hall and the Chitlin Circuit or 19-year-old Michael sweating in discotheques while simultaneously holding weekly bible studies at home with his mother and sister, it is impossible to see how claims of the secularity of his stretcher photo, at best, are incomplete without a thick account of religion. Within this context, we read Michael Jackson’s pained black iconicity *as* lived religious experience in the context of the post-civil rights era.

In many ways, the process of secularizing Jackson’s pained black iconicity can be traced back to his signing, alongside his four older brothers, with Motown Records in the late 1960s as the prodigious lead singer of the Jackson 5. In the turbulent landscape of the late 1960s, the cultural emergence of the Jackson 5 represented a cultural phenomenon. Against widespread social unrest, Richard Nixon’s call for law and order, and the quelling of black rebellion led by black youth across the country, the Jackson 5’s rise to fame represented a powerful social force that channeled the spirit of the era and challenged prevailing stereotypes surrounding the ugliness and categorical inferiority of black youth. The Jackson 5’s ascent to unprecedented global superstardom became a lens through which one could study the intricate dynamics of contestation, negotiation, and resistance within a nation grappling with racial tensions and social transformation. Their music and presence provided a captivating backdrop for analyzing a society’s complexities amid internal strife, offering insights into the battle to determine black people’s collective power within the United States within this turbulent period.

It is within this context of national anxieties and uprisings that Little Michael Jackson and his four older brothers were carefully molded for global consumption on Berry Gordy's famed Motown Assembly Line, setting the stage for the Jackson family's secularization process. The primary purpose of the Motown Assembly Line was to take unpolished black youth and transform them into talent fit to perform in front of every manner of audience. More than simply a system instituted to perfect musical talent, the Motown Assembly Line existed to present black people as *fully human* and worthy of recognition within the modern world. Countering unpoliceable, ungovernable performances of youthful black rebellion permeating the U.S. in the mid to late 60s, Motown aimed to manufacture black talent that, once released from the Assembly Line, represented a governable subjectivity that would obscure the ominous traces of the region-and-shadow-of-death that haunted black living, black moving, and black (non)being in the United States. Consequently, in the context of Motown's commitment to mold five black Witness boys from the Midwest into secular, supra-racial paragons of law and order, we assert that the Motown Assembly Line must be studied as an instrument of secularism meant to manage religion and race, not only talent. As an instrument of secularism, we posit that the Motown Assembly Line should be addressed not just as the management of *musical* talent but also as the management of practices, bodies, and the lived religious experiences of those whose lives, for myriad reasons, signified strangeness, enfreakment, and incommensurability with the call to social and religious order permeating the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Furthermore, the negotiation of their Witness beliefs and practices amidst the secular demand to perform patriotic rituals like singing the National Anthem at the 1970 World Series serves as a compelling foil to apolitical and purely secular accounts of the rise of Little Michael Jackson and the Jackson 5. The tensions they faced highlight the complex interplay between religious convictions, artistic expression, and industry demands. By examining how the Jackson family navigated their religious identity within a secularized context, we achieve a more comprehensive understanding of Michael Jackson's management of his lived experiences as a Witness and the domain of popular culture in the mid-1980s. Consequently, if we arrive at the site of Jackson's pained black iconicity waving from the site of the stretcher and see a secular superstar instead of a burning Witness whose door-to-door proselytizing would now have to be put on hold until his recovery, it is not because the evidence of things unseen is not present beneath the surface of the image. Ultimately, the burning of Michael Jackson's body during the filming of a Pepsi commercial, as well as the subsequent stretcher photo taken in its wake, are perceived as secular events that produced secular material culture because the secularization process that began 15 years earlier via the Motown Assembly Line was an unqualified success.

4. The Price of Fame

If one were to initiate a Google search centered on stretcher photos of Michael Jackson, they would inevitably come across images of Jackson lying on a stretcher. However, the specific photo engaged in this analysis would not be the first one they encountered. That position is occupied by photos of Jackson's lifeless body lying on a stretcher, taken in the immediate hours following the pronouncement of his death due to cardiac arrest. Jackson, a victim of involuntary manslaughter, tragically passed away while rehearsing for a series of performances titled "This Is It". These concerts, scheduled to take place at the O2 Arena in London between 13 July 2009, and 6 March 2010, were subsequently canceled following Jackson's untimely death on 25 June 2009.

In the days leading up to his death, evidence submitted in court proceedings highlighted concerns about Jackson's deteriorating mental and physical health. Emails exchanged between a stage manager and a concert executive involved in the ill-fated "This Is It" show revealed knowledge of Jackson's declining condition. The stage manager expressed observations of Jackson's deteriorating state and suggested that he needed mental preparation and physical training to perform. It was evident that Jackson's ability to execute even basic maneuvers during rehearsals had significantly diminished. The accumulation

of this evidence presents a troubling picture of the circumstances surrounding Jackson's passing. It highlights concerns about the prioritization of profit over the well-being of artists, questions the responsibility of corporations in managing the health and safety of performers, and underscores the need for ethical and accountable practices within the entertainment industry.

In the unreleased 1986 track titled "Price of Fame", Michael Jackson hauntingly cries out "don't you ever complain, don't be feeling your pain", emphasizing the exorbitant cost demanded by fame. These lyrics offer a chilling insight into the dark underbelly of pained black iconicity. They capture the sacrifice and suppression of personal pain that fame exacts, representing the deathly toll paid for achieving iconic status. The haunting significance of this cry is further intensified when examined alongside the two macabre stretcher photos taken of Jackson. These visual images provide a disquieting punctuation mark to James Baldwin's piercing conception of the United States as a dishonest custodian of black life and wealth, responsible for the creation and perpetuation of the "Michael Jackson Cacophony". The lyrics and the stretcher photos add a macabre emphasis to Baldwin's critique, exposing the intricate entanglement of black fame with the insidious forces that seek to control and profit from it. These haunting elements culminate to create a chilling denouement, akin to the finale of a horror movie. They compel us to confront the haunting reality of the sacrifice demanded by fame, particularly for those navigating pained black iconicity. The cry to suppress one's pain becomes a haunting refrain, echoing through the corridors of artistic creation. In this unnerving tableau, the distorted allure of fame is stripped away, revealing the harrowing price paid by those caught in its unforgiving grip. With each haunting repetition of Jackson's cry, the warped nature of popular culture's fascination with black icons is laid bare.

Studying the haunting lyrics and macabre stretcher photos of Michael Jackson invites the black scholar of religion to tarry with the haunting, to confront the uncanny and irretrievable aspects of black life. Such a critical undertaking also offers an opportunity to engage in a visual study of Jackson's pained black iconicity, refusing any attempt to sacralize or sanitize it for the purpose of recuperating Jackson's blackness within preconceived categories and disciplinary boundaries that he himself resisted during his lifetime. This visual study also invites the black scholar of religion to venture beyond the limitations of traditional interpretation and understanding. It calls for an unflinching gaze toward the horror and profound complexities that envelope pained black iconicity, recognizing that such a study resists facile attempts to reclaim or uplift blackness within disciplinary regulations.

By analyzing the haunting stretcher photos of Michael Jackson within the ghostly and ghostly contest of the Michael Jackson Cacophony, the black scholar of religion rejects a cheap, gilded politics of uplift and refuses to constrain black life within normative frameworks. Instead, a haunting conceptual approach to black visual culture and the study of black religion necessitates a profound confrontation with the disquieting realities, surpassing the inclination to conceal or soften the challenges and tribulations endured by black artists or the communities that create the conditions of possibility for their great and terrible emergence in the modern world. It acknowledges the irretrievable and resists the temptation to tidy up the messy dimensions of black existence in order to conform to established norms.

In this vision of haunting, similar to an undertaker, the black scholar of religion is divested from the cheap politics of uplift. Instead, we embrace the responsibility to engage with the ghostly forces that animate black life and death, boldly confronting pained black icons and their deviant ghostly presences that mockingly defy disciplinary restrictions. By engaging with the haunting, the black scholar of religion uncovers the power and agonistic potential that lie within the haunting forces of black life and death.

5. Tupac Shakur's Stretcher Photo and Racial Management

On 30 November 1994 Tupac Shakur was the victim of a robbery and shooting in the borough of Manhattan in New York City. Shakur, along with three other men, was

assaulted by two-masked gunman in the lobby of Quad Studios where he was relieved of thousands of dollars' worth of jewelry. Due to his resistance, the robbery the assailants shot Shakur five times; twice in the head, twice in the groin area, and once in his left hand. Shakur, afraid for his life (and contrary to the recommendations of emergency room physicians) checked out of New York's Metropolitan Hospital Center where he was being treated for his wounds in order to evade the potentiality of another attempt upon his life. The following day, Shakur appeared in a New York courtroom bandaged, sitting in a wheelchair to receive his sentence for the sexual assault of Ayana Jackson, a charge Shakur denied unto death. Shakur posted bond and recuperated from his injuries at the New York City home of actress and friend Jasmine Guy, while receiving protection from the Fruit of Islam (Guy 2004, p. 168). Subsequently, Tupac was incarcerated in upstate New York at the Clinton Correctional facility until he was bailed out by Death Row Records C.E.O. and Compton MOB Piru affiliate Marion "Suge" Knight in 1995.

Following the shooting at Quad Studio, Tupac was captured in what is now an iconic photograph of him strapped onto a stretcher with his head visibly bandaged surrounded by emergency medical technicians and a NYPD police detective, who are onboarding him into an ambulance. Who Tupac is giving "the finger" to has been a subject of debate; as most accounts understand Shakur's gesture as aimed towards the photographer and the media and others (in minor key) see the gesture as aimed towards his assailants. However, it is documented that seconds prior to exposing his middle finger, as he was being carried past the photographer on the stretcher, Shakur remarked, "I can't believe you are taking my picture on a stretcher" (Berman 1998).

This traumatic experience of being the victim of robbery, assault, and shooting was narrated by Shakur on many subsequent records and enshrined him as an authentic street actor in the eyes of black youth. But rather than reading the middle finger as tied squarely to Tupac's horizontal tensions, I want to think about Tupac's middle finger as a metaphorical "finger" to the very construction of the modern world in which black male vulnerability and suffering is ensnared.² Tupac's middle finger as a material expression of his verbal maxim of "Fuck The World", becomes an analytic—an apocalyptic vision—in understanding the project of bringing about the end of the modern world and its anti-black formulation.

The medium of the photograph allows for the viewer to move beyond that which is on the surface and to embrace the layers of complexity within the very world that makes the image a possibility. Scholar of black religion Anthony Pinn highlights photography as a tool for theological reflection positing photography as containing two components; the material captured and the question of that which the image does not contain (Pinn 2012, p. 5). Interrogating what is not captured in the photograph invites viewers to ask the question, "what more is here?" What is present to the viewer of Shakur on the emergency stretcher are the EMT's, a detective, the open door of the ambulance, Shakur outstretched holding up his middle finger. What is absent from the stretcher photograph—the "what more is here?"—is the enmeshment of black male vulnerability as religious itself and ensconced within the necropolitical order of the state. As a means of understanding Shakur's stretcher photo as religious artifact, the production of racial management and its erasure of black male vulnerability as religious, needs attention.

Political theologian Vincent Lloyd understands the management of race and religion as the process in which raced and religious figures can be incorporated as "publicly significant" for the body politic (Lloyd 2016, p. 1). Racial management as an operation of legibility through muting radical vision resulting in a strengthening of the terms of order that undergird black suffering. Ensuring the success of the action of racial management, requires a narrowing of what counts as religious and racial in order for the body politic to see and understand race and religion within the state's vision—as separable and disconnected frameworks. For Lloyd, this is the very project of secularism—"what does and does not count as appropriate religion", which requires for those at the underside of "order" to uncover that which racial management has rendered illegible (Lloyd 2016, p. 4). This uncovering, which is also a broadening, is a method of discovering the possibility of

religious meaning within Shakur's stretcher photograph that initially may be hidden from the viewer. Shakur, who in many instances discussed his robbery and assault never mentioned the stretcher photograph in a public medium. Possessing an uncanny eloquence in articulating his experiences, Shakur's somewhat puzzling absence of commentary on the photo leaves interpretation of the subject open to interpretation.

Applying the proverbial "uncovering" to the stretcher photograph of Shakur, what emerges is the illegibility of black male vulnerability as counted within the domain of the religious, unless that figure is making a recognizably explicit religious claim through bodily or vocal gestures. On the surface, Shakur's stretcher photo may be illegible as an artifact worthy of religious reflection, as his actions are not demonstrably religious. However, the potential illegibility of the photograph as a religious artifact may require from the viewer an atomization of the photographed individual's actions and bodily performance tethered squarely to the frozen moment. The illegibility of the religious nature of Shakur's captured trauma is read in this reading of the photograph, as an extension of secularism's project of the management and circumscription of black suffering. Thus, secularism is not only about "what does and does not count as appropriate religion", but *who* counts as worthy of naming what is and what is not religious. Thus, to not see the entwined nature of Shakur's black male vulnerability captured within the photographic as religious, carries within it the potential of rearticulating the hegemonic objectives of secularism's project. The potential within "what more is here?" as an analytic of Shakur's photograph is the constitutive entanglement of race, religion, and the specter of blackness as condemned property by birth right.

6. The Stretcher, *Partus*, and a Reversal of the World

"The birth canal of Black women or women who birth blackness then, is another kind of domestic Middle Passage; the birth canal, that passageway from the womb through which a fetus passes during birth. The belly of the ship births blackness; the birth canal remains in, and as, the hold. The belly of the ship births blackness (as no/relation). Think now of those incarcerated women in the United States who are forced to give birth while shackled even when that shackling is against the law. Birthing in the belly of the state: birthed in and as the body of the state". (Sharpe 2016, p. 74)—Christina Sharpe

Grappling with the condemnation of blackness within Shakur's stretcher photo requires foregrounding Shakur's relationship with his mother, and the myth making power of black reproduction within the theo-racial imagination of the West. Womanist and black feminist thinkers have well documented the historical and theological processes in which the racial calculus of the modern world was imposed upon and birthed through the wombs of black women. *Partus Sequiter Ventrem*, the 1662 colonial Virginia slave law translated as the "offspring follows the belly", codified plantation slavery's ability to lay claim upon the children of the enslaved in perpetuity. As construction material, the law draws upon the origins of women within Hebrew creation mythologies and its "curse of Eve", to demonstrate the inability of Black women to exist within the category of womanhood (Morgan 2018, pp. 1–17). As such, *partus* births legal conceptions of inheritable (racial) property within the American colonies. *Partus*, as a central meaning-making tool at the intersection race, religion, and property for the modern world continues to carry within its "afterlife" black confinement through the state's carceral apparatus (Sharpe 2016, pp. 74–77). Culturally, Tupac's mother's anthem *Dear Mama* and the recently released Allen Hughes-directed documentary of the same name, have solidified Afeni Shakur's iconic status within black popular culture. We offer that *partus* emerges as an analytical category to understand the tethering of Afeni and Tupac's quest to move beyond the confines of colonialism's ongoing racial calculus of the condemnation of blackness. Afeni and Tupac's boundedness provide important linkage between reproduction of the socially dead (through birth) and Tupac's rebel performance.

However, what has not been explored is Afeni's place within the containment (both at the level of imagination and material) of the West through her carceral confinement, as rooted within cosmological assertions of blackness as property. Incarcerated and representing herself legally while pregnant with Tupac, Afeni's child is gestating—"cultivated in prison."³ As Christina Sharpe notes of the afterlife of *partus* expressed in the carceral system—"Birthing in the belly of the state: birthed in and as the body of the state" (Sharpe 2016, p. 74). It is at the site of the womb of his mother, mother and child had to resist the shadow of the carceral state that draped over his life (Guy 2004, pp. 89–123). As the afterlife of *partus*, Shakur is seen within the eyes of the state as inheriting his mother's deviancy, thus he inherits the states stalking and quest for confinement. The postindustrial period and its contrived demonization of black male thugs born to drug addicts, destined to destroy society, as an afterlife of *partus*, produces black children that Dorothy Roberts notes were, "born guilty" (Roberts 1997, pp. 150–202). The conditions that rendered the possibility—the inevitability—of Shakur victimized on a stretcher outside of Quad Studios begins with his criminalization/vulnerability at the very origin of his conception as bound to the "deviancy" of his mother. Reading Shakur's stretcher photo through the prism of *partus* allows for us to interrogate the "what more is here" within the photograph. Shakur's hand configuration becomes an act of rebellion, not only against horizontal enemies (the photographer and the street enemies who assaulted him), but against the terms of order of the world—the condemnation of blackness, a refusal of its terms. His gesticulation can be read as a symbol towards a quest for what Marable describes as a "fundamental redefinition of the known world" (Marable 1981, p. 14) and black suffering as its central project.

Shakur's hand configuration is also sonically expressed as a redefinition of the black womb as the production of social death. Shakur, on his posthumously released album, *The Don Killuminati*, centers the "virginity" of Afeni Shakur as a framework for understanding the refusal of inherent black vulnerability. Trafficking within the figure of a black Madonna, Shakur is inverting the very logics of *partus* through disentangling the womb of his mother from the "death-bound subject". While male descriptions of female virginity reinforce the "virgin/whore dichotomy,"⁴ I want to offer that the description of virginity in this context is a direct challenge toward the theo-logics that form and shape the "world" as such. Through recasting his mother who struggled with drug addiction and was driven toward abject poverty by the state, as a "virgin" (Blasphemy) and as a "Black queen" (Dear Mama), Shakur remakes the afterlife of *partus* and its tethering to the dispensation of a unipolar American identity that requires the scapegoating of poor black people during the late-stages of the Cold War.⁵ Seeing the stretcher photo through the prism of *partus* allows for us to see the layers to Shakur's hand configuration as a declaration of the absurdity of the *world*, and its cosmological order.

Furthermore, the stretcher exposes the inability for disciplinarity as constitutive to the world to understand the stretcher outside of its own terms. Rather than Shakur's extended finger being captured as a "theological act" within the confines of discipline, the finger is tool of disruption against the very desire to bring Shakur inside of religion and theology on disciplinarity's terms. Instead, the photographed finger is an indictment of disciplinarity's role in constructing the world that makes the stretcher possible. It exposes the very gaze upon and documentation of black flesh as central to the conditions of possibility for Shakur to be in his vulnerable state in the first place. While the photo may seem that people are helping Shakur, in fact Shakur later rhymes about his shooting experience, centering his distrust for the EMT's and surrounding law enforcement.⁶ The presence of police officers and the gaze of the photographer is the very performance of the mistrust from which Shakur seeks evasion—being understood within the enclosed language of documentation and legibility.

7. The World and Condemned Blackness

"Shakur's lyrics convey how Black men are perpetually susceptible to death as a key feature of social life, which acts as a kind of haunting, and how this perpetual

susceptibility is learned by frequently overserving Black men having their bodies destroyed". (Rudlow 2019, p. 3)—Kevin James Rudlow

Released while incarcerated at the Clinton Correctional Facility, Shakur's third studio project, aptly titled "Me Against the World", was released on 14 March 1995 receiving critical acclaim by fans and hip hop critics alike. The album's primary theme is that of the inherent vulnerability of black men in a society constructed upon anti-black violence in which they must attempt survival—something that seems a distant possibility. *Me Against the World* articulates Shakur's deepest fears around vulnerability to early death at the hands of his enemies—both street enemies and the state—deep despair that culminates in a death drive through suicidal ideation, the struggle of poverty and family brokenness, and the psychological harm that emerges from the loss of friends to street violence. *Me Against the World* has come to be regarded as a foundational text for black male life within America's postindustrial ghetto, and provides insight into what constitutes for Shakur, the modern world.

The Shakurian framework of the "world" as an extension of *partus*, is a space constitutive with the negation of black life through sexual stigmatization, carceral haunting, and black male vulnerability. On the aptly titled track "Fuck the World", Shakur explores the intersecting subjugations black males experience as the "thingification" within the world.⁷ Shakur begins the song with a critique of the state and its concomitant animalization of black persons through its accusation of him being a "rapist". Importantly, Shakur does not implicate the woman who made sexual assault accusations against him, but locates the source of his problems within that of juridical proceedings. For Shakur, this approach may be rooted in his interpretation of his legal troubles within the ongoing state suppression against his family for their participation in black liberation movements as the work of John Potash and Sanit Holley demonstrate (See Potash 2007; Holley 2023). Shakur saw himself as the victim of the state and its media apparatus turning him into something that he claimed he was not—from a person cultivated by and a champion of black women and into that of a rapist. This is the very definition of negation, being transformed into something that you are not by the dominant power structure as a method of casting a person or community in the role of the enemy who needs to be restrained. Of negation, Kevin Rudlow remarks that black men are "always culpable for the violent disposition imagined onto them, which is used to justify harming and murdering them" (Rudlow 2019, p. 638). The police officer hovering over Shakur's stretcher is the same officer who arrived at the Parker Meridian Hotel the night of Shakur being accused of sexual assault. Under the officer's gaze, the buck has been restrained.

Furthermore within "the world", Shakur locates a carceral haunting that stalks black male life as he is attempting to navigate the world without falling victim to "crooked cops again", and the "packed jails" that mark postindustrial black American male experience (See Meline 2016). Within the juridical process that provides legitimacy to organizing the world, there does not exist a resolution to the vulnerability of black male life. Tupac appeals to juridical authority for protection and finds it unforgiving to the violent horizontal conditions—the "killing fields" (Shakur 1996)—that black males navigate within ghettoized communities that renders them to carry unlawfully concealed weapons for protection. The very existence of the stretcher photo is based on the gaze towards, rather than the alleviation of, black suffering. The photographer, like the judge in Shakur's lyrics, is moved to document Shakur's pain while he is defenseless.

The "world" as constituted, for Tupac, is one where he is through the process of racial management made legible only as a rapist, a central trope of the management of black male bodies.⁸ He perceives himself as stigmatized and stalked by law enforcement, and haunted by the carceral state which seeks to usher black males from ghettoized environments outside of the visual field of America into carceral spaces. This vulnerability is tethered vertically to the United States' legitimacy being birthed through the negation of black persons as property and blackness as domestic enemy; and horizontally in black males navigating the "killing fields" that mark postindustrial ghettoized conditions. It is these black male vulnerabilities constitutive to the modern period, that lead Tupac to scream—both audibly

and visually—“fuck the world!” Tupac’s middle finger in the stretcher photo possess what cultural historian Clyde Davis describes as having “the effect of a profanity screamed in a chapel, a disruptive challenge to orthodoxy and tradition” (Taylor 1998, p. 4). To see Tupac on the stretcher with his middle finger exposed, is to see a rejection of the cosmological justifications of the central orthodoxy of the modern world—the condemnation of blackness.

8. A Blasphemous Depiction

Eschewing the secularization thesis, Tupac understands the experiences of black persons as the raw material for modernity as expressed through the category of religion and theological thought. Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglass describes this construct as the “nomos” which roots the order of the nation within the eternal order of the cosmos itself.⁹ Shakur’s stretcher photo is synergistic with his posthumously released studio project *The Don Killuminati: The Seven Day Theory* which explores black boundedness as tied to cosmic justifications, through what theologian Willie Jennings describes as a Christian imagination (Shakur 1996).¹⁰ Visually, in what was then a shocking move, Shakur places black vulnerability on full display through the album’s cover art by depicting himself hanging from a cross in a similar manner to Renaissance paintings of the crucifixion of Christ. Similarly, to the stretcher photo, Shakur is on the cross alone, scrutinized by those who overdetermine him from the outside. Isolated as a burden bearer of the religious order of the world. *The Seven Day Theory*, then, can be heard as a sonic artifact of the stretcher photo, an intense reverberation ripping apart that which restrains.

Hanging on the cross, Shakur is depicted with an emaciated figure, with his head hanging on his right shoulder and a crown of thorns fashioned into his trademark bandana. His hands and feet are nailed to the cross, with barbed wire wrapped around his ankles and wrists, and blood dripping down his body. Similarly to the stretcher photograph, Shakur’s trademark “T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E”. is absent, replaced by a wound in his side that mirrors the depictions of the fatal wound applied to Jesus Christ in this artistic rendering.¹¹ Etched into the cross of Makaveli are the names of cities such as: Harlem, Compton, Watts, Oakland, New Orleans, Los Angeles, etc., and a map that connects the cities to one another. The communities written on Shakur’s cross represent what critical geographers’ term “organized zones of abandonment”, where capitalism’s economic devastation and decreased lifespans are centralized. Racialized death is always premature and geographic in scope, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s definition of racism maintains.¹² Reading Shakur’s cross through the stretcher photo allows us to see his representation of black isolation and exposure to early death.

Shakur is situating himself as representative of those that the modern world has confined to zones of death through inverting one of the central symbols that Christian colonial modernity and its ruling class deploys in order to mute the freedom dreams of black persons—the cross of Jesus (Marable 1983). The spatial register of black subjugation—the purging of black people from white space and the sequestering of black life into abandoned zones—provides the ground for *geographic whiteness*—or, black spatial erasure. Shakur is isolated in the stretcher photo despite the presence of emergency medical technicians, contrary to comfort, they provide for Shakur a reminder of his vulnerability at the hands of the state. The isolation of the stretcher is expressed through Shakur’s depiction of himself on the cross isolated and outside of the visual field of care. Geographic whiteness and its production of black isolation is material expression of white theological visions of the cosmos. White space for those that God has deemed elect, thus saved. Black space—or “forgotten places”—is for those that God has judged as the reprobate, thus damned. Shakur’s stretcher, “the finger”, and his depiction of himself crucified, point us towards his rejection of these constitutive realities.

The fifth song on *The Don Killumanati* aptly titled “Blasphemy”, illustrates this point of the cosmologically damned within the order of the “world”. The song begins with the outro of the popular 1980s and 1990s radio and religious television series, “This Week in Bible Prophecy”.¹³ A television show which centered the eschatological viewpoint of

dispensationalism as a hermeneutical framework through which Evangelical Christians interpret American national and world events. The outro begins with a distorted voice saying, “God has a plan. . .” Placing the outro from this religious broadcast as the intro to the song, situates the “blasphemous claims” that Tupac articulates. Shakur’s “blasphemy” is his critique of the modern period and its subsequent black subjugation as rooted in a racial eschatology that sanctions the order of the world to mark black persons for vulnerability and early death. Furthermore, his “blasphemy” is one which calls out the ruse played by religious authorities that want to distract black persons from addressing the material conditions of black vulnerability by obfuscating the *fact* that hell is not at the conclusion of history but exists currently within our midst. As a sonic extension of the stretcher photo, “Blasphemy” disrupts the isolation experienced through the technologies of restraint and containment deployed against black persons. It identifies the conditions of possibility for the stretcher—what makes the stretcher possible, inevitable.

In this register, Shakur functions within the configuration of the rebel as articulated by Manning Marable. For Marable, the rebel is a figure that challenges absurd cosmologies that justify oppression. Marable opines, “To rebel was to be both wildly irrational and politically astute. The spirituality and, indeed, supernatural character of black religion gave just cause to the political act of struggle” (Marable 1981, p. 19). Shakur embodies this formulation explaining to journalist Ed Gordon that “God has cursed me to see what life should be like (Gordon 1994).” The rebel possesses both the gift and the curse of exposing the construction of the world for what it is rooted in—absurdity—through “seeing” the freedom of possibilities that should be realized yet evade realization. Shakur pointedly self-identifies as the “rebel of the underground”, exposing the absurd conditions in which black persons make their lives within the zones of abandonment (the underground).¹⁴ Within a similar register to Shakur’s, Marable draws upon the image of childbirth to signal the severing of the consciousness of the dominated from the master, “like childbirth, blackwater was a painful break from the consciousness of the master, in favor of creativity and collective emancipation” (Marable 1981, p. 40). Shakur’s stretcher photo points us towards this “break”, a fugitive performance against the world’s enclosure towards emancipation.

The rebel is one who diagnoses a problem and creates momentum to solve it—to sever its cord. Expressed in Shakurian fashion it is the ability to diagnose what others have chosen not to see. When Shakur states, “I did not create THUG LIFE, I diagnosed it”, he offers the hearer the opportunity to “touch” and “feel” those that are historically isolated and forgotten, and to generate social momentum to solve the structural isolation of black persons. Furthermore, Shakur’s choice of bodily adornment is a performance of the rebel at the site of the flesh. Shakur’s iconic tattoos function as an invitation to the viewer to see his indictment against the seizure of blackness. Relating to bodily adornment, Anthony Pinn states:

Because the display of the body either affirms or challenges cultural arrangements and assumptions affecting both the individual and the group, decoration or alteration is never a merely superficial and personal development. . . Adornment, hence, gives the body visibility and importance not intended by the mechanisms of punishment. (Pinn 2010, pp. 21–22)

Shakur’s tattoos, then, are not simply decorative in nature, but rather they attempt to usurp cultural “arrangements and assumptions” about the disposability and docility of impoverished black males born as confined property. One such bodily decoration is the cross on Shakur’s back with the word “Exodus 18:31” written within it. Absent a correlating biblical reference to the book of Exodus, Shakur’s tattoo seems to reference the life and events of 19th century rebel Nat Turner, whose rebellion began on 23 August 1831. Tupac is drawing upon a central symbol of black religion—the Exodus narrative by way of Nat Turner’s rebellion. Perhaps the significance of “Exodus 18:31” being placed *inside* a cross reflects Shakur’s understanding of the constitutive relationships between dominant religion and the construction of the world as such, from which black people need escape—violently if they must. Shakur’s flesh work challenges the container that is

American Christian thought that has subdued black persons; like Marable's blackwater it becomes expressive ground for a cultural movement "towards the collective consciousness of liberation (Marable 1981, p. 47).

Additionally, Shakur's rebellious bodily adornment includes a tattoo on his stomach that reads "50 NIGGAZ" with a picture of an AK-47 assault rifle beneath it. For Tupac, "50 NIGGAZ" represented his organizing philosophy of rebellion. Shakur believed that in every state there is at least "one real nigga" in which he could build a fifty-person army of soldiers to implement his political philosophy with and on the behalf of disenfranchised black people.¹⁵ Like Turner, Shakur's concept of rebellion was not metaphorical or non-violent, but was rooted in physical action against the necropolitical formulation of the state as he pleads on the track "Revolution"; for street gangs to involve themselves in the work of active, armed rebellion.

Rather than the atomization of violence, Shakur sees violence as a tool deployed by organized gangs to dismantle the order of the world. It is from the proverbial "underground" where Tupac launches his assaults on the theo-logics that produce the containment and disorganized isolation of black life. The stretcher photo of Shakur, isolated and wounded as a result of life at the bottom of the world, reveals the nemesis of the rebel within the racial management of the world.

Importantly, Shakur's "50 Niggaz" tattoo is not visible in the stretcher photograph, as the belt that restrains Tupac onto the stretcher covers it from view. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a belt as "a continuous band of tough flexible material for transmitting motion and power or conveying materials" (Belt n.d.). The material of a belt as flexible, is designed for the purposes of being modified, to be able to stretch and adjust in order to contain that which it seeks to contain or restrain. Similarly to the politics of counter-insurgency, the belt possesses the quality and ability to adapt to different shapes and sizes at various points in time in order to perform its task of coercion. Within the stretcher photo, the belt constraining Tupac covers a revolutionary tattoo which is the en fleshed performance of a revolutionary idea. As such, the belt can be read as a technology of constraint against that which struggles to be contained—that which seeks to evade capture. The belt as a material performance symbolically gestures towards the quest at sequestering black fugitivity within the necropolitical order. But the finger gestures towards the ongoing creative modes of evasiveness.

Furthermore, this desire for fugitivity against the constraints of capture is seen through what is present and absent on Tupac's uplifted arm which presents his hand gesture. Shakur's iconic "Outlaw" tattoo on his left forearm had not yet been en fleshed, but what is present at the time of the stretcher photograph are the barbed-wire tattoos that flank his wrist and his elbow. Shakur, upon his release from the Clinton Correctional Facility in 1995, etches "OUTLAW" in this empty space between his barbed-wire tattoos. Importantly, the Oxford Language Dictionary defines an outlaw as [emphasis mine]: "a person who has broken the law, especially one who remains at large or is a *fugitive*. an *intractable* horse or other animal. a person deprived of the benefit and *protection of the law*" (Outlaw n.d.).

Shakur placing the "OUTLAW" tattoo at the site of his outstretched arm on the stretcher photograph, in between barbed-wire tattoos, emphasizes his quest for fugitivity from within the constraints of the carceral order. A call for fugitivity. An enterprise of evasion from capture. Yet, a mission that is always elusive for that which is *intractable* and does not warrant protection from the law. Alongside the EMT's surrounding Shakur's stretcher is an NYPD police detective "helping" the constrained Shakur enter the ambulance. Furthermore, the photograph of Shakur on the stretcher was captured by retired New York City police detective, Gary Miller. Miller had been essentially stalking Shakur, stating that he had "extensive professional experience covering the 'rap music scene,' was familiar with Mr. Shakur's associates and habits and thus was almost immediately at the scene."¹⁶ In his vulnerability, Shakur is still under the carceral gaze that exists for the exact purposes of rendering the fugitive/outlaw spirit mute. This was not a mutually agreed upon photoshoot. The photographer's goal was to seize Shakur and make him legible to the

world according to the terms of the photographer. Shakur's middle finger is a refusal of the carceral gaze that is a telluric expression of his cosmological fear, that the carceral is that which is eternal.

9. Is God a Cosmic Cop?

The condemnation of blackness for Shakur is material expression of the carceral theological language marking the geographic terrain of the damned. Shakur poses a rhetorical question to his mother which interrogates dominant Christian expressions of God being construed through the lens of the carceral. The query expresses, for Tupac, a belief that the enforced sequestration through geographic boundaries crafted for black contained erasure is situated within a framework of God as an agent of the state. Carceral studies have demonstrated that the role of the police is not to "solve crimes" but rather exist as institutions for racial and class control, and the destruction of black freedom movements.¹⁷ God as a "cop" thus sanctions the zones of abandonment for the damned, an eternal quest at black capture. The officer in the stretcher photo, rather than safety, represents an invasion of Shakur's safety; as Shakur ultimately checks out of Bellevue Hospital following the shooting at the behest of his mother and attorney who were concerned that there was too large a police presence at the hospital (Potash 2007, p.86). For Shakur, is God simply someone who watches his vulnerability without interceding? If so, then God is the author of the carceral gaze and provides legitimacy for photographer and the police officer's voyeurism.

The carceral cosmic gaze is, for Tupac, enhanced by the ministerial class and its commitments to a false sense of security and order and the expense of the black poor. As a central object of Shakur's scorn, preachers are depicted as misleading their black flocks through an over-spiritualization of the concept of hell. For Shakur, if hell is only at the conclusion of one's life, then the preacher can simply overlook the hellish material conditions in which black life is forced to navigate. For Shakur, this ministerial perspective is an insufficient account of the conditions of black life and lead to capture and not fugitive movements. As such, this form of theological orientation, which informs black Christian religious practices, functions lock and step with the aspirations of the ruling white class in order to keep normative racial economic arrangements in place.¹⁸ Similarly to the members of law enforcement in the stretcher photo, the ministerial class is buttressed by a cosmic surveillance rendering them untrustworthy for Shakur.

Shakur's hand configuration of exposing his middle finger, then, can be read as a denunciation of the modern world and its absurdity of black negation, buttressed by carceral cosmologies that order the world around the confinement, vulnerability, and erasure of black persons. Grounded within the lineage of the rebel, the stretcher photo of Shakur becomes a signal to move beyond the parameters of American Christian thought and its conjoined blasphemy of the idolatry of whiteness and black subjugation.

10. Conclusions

By embracing the pained black iconicity represented by Jackson and Shakur, we invite the reader to consider alternative ways of understanding the intricate dynamics of black experiences and their concomitant entanglement with grammar, sartorial decisions, and iconic visuality often reserved for disciplinarily legible religious thought and practice. Through the sequined wave and the middle finger salute, we are confronted with a profound invitation to reconceptualize the study of black religion from the site of the stretcher, recognizing that the domain of religious inquiry extends far beyond formal institutions. Such a call to practice black study through a study of Jackson and Shakur's pained visuality calls for an expanded understanding that acknowledges the multifaceted expressions of transgression, religion, haunting, and improvisatory living permeating the-region-and-shadow of death.

Moreover, central to our analysis is the recognition of the stretcher as a powerful mechanism designed to contain and *platform* black suffering. However, beyond its functional purpose, the stretcher unveils itself as a technology that disrupts established boundaries,

notably the dichotomy between religion and secularism. By examining its role as a liminal space of examination, the stretcher reveals how blackness, as an agonistic, improvisatory, and contrapuntal force, destabilizes and challenges the disciplinary terms that order and regulate the academic study of religion. With visceral, haunting clarity, the stretcher photos of Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur illuminate how the stretcher, situated at the nexus of suffering and representation, carries profound implications for understanding the complexities of black experiences. By interrogating the stretcher's signification within the domain of popular culture, we unravel its enigmatic ability to simultaneously contain and subvert the forces that seek to define and confine blackness. In this conceptual framework, the stretcher emerges as a site of critical inquiry. It becomes a poignant embodiment of the tensions between life and death, the spectacular and the quotidian, as well as the world-raising burden of recognition and freedom within the black experience. By engaging with this conceptual framework, we navigate the profound depths of black study and the black study of religion, unpacking the ways in which the stretcher becomes a locus for understanding the complexities of black suffering and its reverberations in broader sociocultural and academic discourses.

Thinking alongside Manning Marable's concept of Blackwater, we have examined the braided interplay between religion, popular culture, and the destabilizing impact of these images on traditional notions of academic study. The stretcher photos unveil the intricacies of black experiences, challenging hegemonic narratives and normative expectations, while embodying the uncanny, contrapuntal spirit of popular culture, black iconicity, black religion, and black life. Ultimately, the stretcher serves as a chilling site of critical study that invites all who are willing to tarry with the complex intersections of power, freedom, the production of black iconicity, and the enduring struggles for recognition within the black experience. These images serve as haunting, discursive reminders of the imperative to question established boundaries, challenge normative constructs, and embrace alternative modes of apprehension within the study of black religion.

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Notes

- ¹ In a December 1984 cover story for Ebony Magazine featuring Michael Jackson entitled "The Michael Jackson Nobody Knows", Jackson offered the following quote: "If the politicians can't [end racism], I want to do it. . .I think it's so important to save the world". Elsewhere in the interview, Jackson shares how he aspires for his black iconicity to emulate the character of Jesus Christ: "I'm not calling myself Jesus. . .but I'm comparing [my life] to Jesus because what God gave him was for a reason and he preached and people came about him and he didn't get angry and push them aside and say 'Leave me alone, I ain't got time.'".
- ² For a detailed engagement with the concept of racialized vulnerability in the work of Tupac Shakur, see (Rudlow 2019). Rudlow, engages the work of philosopher Tommy Curry's notion of "Black Male Vulnerability", which is an analytical category highlighting how the lived experiences of black males are erased from theory. Black male vulnerability seeks to expand the frameworks we use to interpret the traumatic experiences of black males (as both perpetrators and victims) outside of the framework of degeneracy and within their situation of social disadvantage. For further discussion on black male vulnerability, see (Curry 2017).
- ³ Tupac Shakur, Clinton Correctional Facility Prison Interview. Fall, 1995.
- ⁴ In creating a mythology of sexual purity, however, Tupac unwillingly duplicates patriarchal sexual categories produced within the colonial environment—namely that women should remain pure and undefiled sexually in order to produce a healthy nation state, a patriarchal replication present in much of black nationalist movements. Furthermore, the creation of black female sexual purity by Tupac rests within a tradition of the black female body that, according to Yancy, "functions as a site of rhetorical wealth,

the Black female body inhabits a social and discursive within which she is constantly named and always interpellated", meaning black women's sexuality is consistently described by men in terms that are not their own for the agenda and purposes of men.

5 See (Roberts 2016). Furthermore, for the term "unipolar dispensation" see (O'Donnell 2019, p. 69).

6 Tupac Shakur, "Only god Can Judge Me", [Interscope, 1996].

7 Cesare (1955, p. 42). "Thingification" communicates the deliberate destruction of the past of the colonized through colonial encounter with colonizing groups. The process creates a reinvention of the colonized to subjugate them and serve the imagination and political (and religious) structures of the metropole.

8 Curry's (2017) work highlights the under-theorization of black males "racialized vulnerability" as undergirded by the myth of the inherent violent predation of black males.

9 Douglass (2015, p. 59). "Nomos: is a predictable social order which "reflects the society's worldview as well as value structure". Religion provides meaning to the "nomos" maintaining a belief that the structure of society is cosmic in nature. For an engaged discussion on "nomos" see (Berger 1990, p. 5).

10 For further discussion of race as an outgrowth of a distorted Christian imagination see (Jennings 2011).

11 Compton visual artist Ronald "Riskie" Brent created the visuals on the album cover, but the visual concept was created by Tupac. Thus, the depiction of Tupac on the cross in the position of the martyr communicates something about how Tupac understood himself within the landscape of American racial, religious, and class perceptions.

12 Ruth Wilson Gilmore's oft quoted definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet *densely interconnected political geographies*", is geographic in scope. For Gilmore's definition of racism see (Gilmore 2022, p. 107). The organization of abandonment, for Gilmore, "accompanies globalizations large-scale movements of capital and labor, and as such they are subject to many other processes that accumulate in and as forgotten places". (Gilmore 2008, p. 31).

13 The television series This Week in Bible Prophecy was produced by Paul and Peter LaLonde. Biological brothers who were Canadian/American film producers, film writers, and co-founder of the film company Cloud Ten Pictures. The show was a popular 1980s biblical series that reaffirmed the dispensational eschatological framework for its viewers. The LaLonde brothers also co-produced the *Left Behind* film (2014) as well as other end-time novels such as: 2000 A.D.: Are You Ready? *And 301 Startling Proofs and Prophecies* (1996). The actual "outro" to the show is as follows: "God has a plan and the Bible unfolds that wonderful plan, through the message of prophecy. God sent Jesus into this world to be our Savior. And that Christ is returning, someday soon To unfold the wonderful plan of eternity, for my life and your life. As long as we're cooperating with God by accepting Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior. And as the Lord, does return in the coming seven days. We'll see you next time here on This Week in Bible Prophecy".

14 Tupac, "Rebel of the Underground", [1991: Interscope].

15 Wall text, Tupac Shakur Exhibit. Wake Me When I am Free, The Canvas @ L.A. Live, Los Angeles, California, 10 February 2022.

16 See (Courthouse News Staff 2013). Post Fotog Sues Over Use of Tupac Shot. Available online: <https://www.courthousenews.com/post-fotog-sues-over-use-of-tupac-shot/> (accessed on 11 August 2023).

17 For further engagement of the role of the police as a system of racial and class control, see (Camp 2016a, 2016b).

18 In a classic interview with urban hip hop outlet *Vibe* magazine, Tupac gives texture to his belief regarding the location of heaven and hell along with how the church, through misleading people about where these locations reside within the human experience, falls short in its role in ameliorating black suffering. Tupac does this in two ways. First, Tupac describes heaven and hell as located in the present. He claims that heaven is when a person "sleeps and has good dreams" and hell is "when you see all the bad stuff you did before you die". Tupac asks an important question regarding hell, "what do they have there [hell] that we don't have here?" Again, Tupac points to drug addiction and people being burned in fires as examples of torments that human beings experience on this plane of existence. He asks, regarding hell, if people will be zombies, and points out that drug addicts function as zombies here. This is an important insight by Tupac. If hell does not contain a different form of existence than our current order, then hell is not something to fear. Furthermore, Tupac's analysis of hell animating this current plane of existence puts forth a critical question: What is the role of religion in ameliorating the hell on earth that people suffer from? If religion does not produce a world that removes hell from our midst, what is the point of practicing such a religion? "Tupac Shakur The Lost Interview", *Vibe* magazine (1996), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P19nehRgby5>, accessed on 3 September 2023.

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