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"That Further by Faith": Ancestral Futurity, Reincarnation, and the Conjuration of Denmark Vesey's Revolutionary Religious Perspective

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Abstract: This article expresses the importance and theoretical viability of Black religious communities reflecting on armed struggle as an option in their pursuit of liberation. African Americans have wrestled with various perspectives on what forms of resistance to white supremacy were religiously legitimate and those that were deemed practical. From moral suasion, immigration, a Black separate state, to violent resistance, Black people in the United States have debated these perspectives and have charted paths forward that continue to be accompanied by Black suffering and death at the hands of racists to the present day. While moral suasion has obtained a hegemonic place in mainstream Black political discourse, violent resistance has often been characterized as both religiously illegitimate and impractical. However, by using concepts from Afrofuturism and traditional African religion, the author will present Denmark Vesey as a model for contemporary Black religio-political thought. Using the themes of "past future", time travel, resurrection, reincarnation, trance, and conjure, the author grounds himself in an African-centered epistemology that transcends the limitations of the Eurocentric model limited only to scientific "reality". The author claims that by conjuring Vesey's revolutionary interreligious Pan-African approach, it will provide more options for Black religio-political theory and praxis.

Keywords: afrofuturism; Denmark Vesey; traditional African religion; revolutionary religion; conjure; religion and violence; religion and politics; black political theory; African-centered

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1. Introduction

Black people have explored and debated various approaches to resist and obtain liberation from white supremacy often within the context of religious communities and/or an idiom of religious discourse. According to Abdul Alkalimat, the methods of struggle included moral suasion, emigration, or violent resistance (Alkalimat 2022, p. 49). However, even though violent resistance and religion have been intimately connected in traditional African societies (for example, *Engolo* in Kongo-Angolan tradition[1]) and in the African diaspora (for example, Capoeira Angola in Brazil[2]), it has become anathema in contemporary African American[3] (religio-)political discourse in the United States. This can, perhaps, be traced to the fact that in both the 19th and 20th centuries the most prominent voices among African Americans emphasized nonviolent moral suasion (moral arguments against oppression) in a religious idiom as they addressed the issue of white supremacy in their time. This is not to say that this strategy was the exclusive approach, but that it gained a normative place in African American religious and political thought because of the influence of those who utilized it.

However, I believe that an alternative framework can make room for different forms of theory building and, perhaps, more promising results. The aim of this article is to utilize concepts from Afrofuturism and African religion as the basis to expand the contemporary discourse on Black religio-political praxis. Using this approach, I argue that conjuring the religio-political philosophy of Denmark Vesey, who organized the most intricate and

widespread insurrectionary plot among the enslaved in the history of the United States, provides access to the ancestral power of his revolutionary religious perspective that can be considered for application in the present/future (Robertson 2000, p. 4; Aptheker 2020, p. 268). By transcending the limitations that confine current forms of resistance to white supremacy within the Black community, this project presents an unconventional model for contemporary (religio-)political theory based on the idea that through time travel we can recover a view of the world that has largely been marginalized and devalued in mainstream Black thought. Moreover, through the reincarnation of Vesey's revolutionary aim, his focus on revolutionizing Black people, his interreligious Pan-African posture, and his belief in divine support for killing oppressors, Black people can embody his revolutionary religious perspective in current debates about how to address anti-Black violence and oppression.

1.1. The Marginalization of Revolutionary Violence in African American Thought

In both the 19th and 20th centuries, there was a towering figure that delegitimized revolutionary violence and reflected (and affected) the general pulse of their time. One of the most important people in the 19th century who confronted white supremacy was Frederick Douglass. Although he did not see any moral problem with the use of violent resistance (and sometimes encouraged it[4]) he saw the strategy of outright violent rebellion as impractical for African Americans. He believed that since Black people were overwhelmingly outnumbered, unarmed, ignorant, and degraded, violent rebellion was vain (Douglass 2022e, p. 103). Furthermore, even though he supported and defended John Brown's methods before and after his failed attempt to take Harper's Ferry, when first presented with it, Douglass opposed the plan and saw success as impossible (Douglass 1994a, p. 759; Blight 2018, pp. 295, 305). When contemplating an approach to liberate the enslaved, Douglass asked questions such as: How would resisters be supported? How would they respond to bloodhounds? What if they are sieged and blocked from provisions and subsistence (Douglass, *Life and Times*, pp. 718–19)? In other words, how does the strategy hold up to the limitations posed by the facts and measures of reality? Based on the constraints warranted considering the scientific facts, Douglass concluded that revolutionary violence among African Americans was an unreasonable pursuit and should be rejected. Rather, Douglass utilized moral suasion and supported limited forms of violent resistance (self-defense, runaways avoiding capture, government-supported violent Black resistance, i.e., Black soldiers fighting in Civil War) (Douglass 2018b, pp. 71–72; 2022a, p. 322; 2022c, p. 517; 2022d, pp. 315–16; Douglass, *Life and Times*, p. 719; Douglass 2018a, p. 39; Lebron 2019, pp. 16, 24).

In the 20th century, Martin Luther King Jr. held, perhaps, a more prominent voice among those who theorized about proper forms of Black resistance to white supremacy of that time. Although he agreed with Douglass that mass violent resistance was impractical (King 1959; 2000a, pp. 27, 147; 2010c, p. 96), he differs from him in that he declared the approach immoral. For King, violence is an active form of hatred and causes bitterness. Moreover, even in response to oppression it functions to fulfill the need for retaliation and the desire to humiliate one's opponent (King 2010b, pp. 90, 91, 94; 1959). Despite the fact that King once made an exception for self-defense, on several occasions King presents hatred as the counterpart of violence; that, universally, the origin of violence was hatred. He states that "the use of violence in our struggle would be. . .immoral. To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe. Hate begets hate; violence begets violence. . .We must meet the forces of hate with the power of love. . ." (King 2010b, p. 74. See also, Ibid., pp. 86, 92, 94; King 1959). Thus, he presented moral suasion through his tactic of nonviolent direct action as the only viable solution both practically and morally (King 2010a, p. 161; 2000b, pp. 89, 90, 98; 2010b, p. 221; 2000a, p. 34). Even though this view of violence was new to the Black community, since the death of King his perspective has held a hegemonic place in Black religio-political discourse and the prospect of violent resistance has been determined to be nothing more than "political fantasy" (Cobb 2016, pp. 2, 11, 16).

1.2. Considerations for a (Re)Turn toward a (Not So) New Paradigm

Nevertheless, a 19th century novel, written by Martin Delany, may hold promise for theoretical grounding to support a desire to (re)turn to and/or (re)gain a framework for religio-political thought that was lost in the subsequent centuries. Entitled *Blake, or Huts of America*, Delany's 1859 text presents a story of an enslaved man who began organizing a violent revolution against slavery after his wife was sold away (Delany 2022, pp. 59, 88, 153; 2017, pp. 288, 293). Three themes that shape this fictional plot of a violent revolution include the centrality of religion, the revolution's Pan-African scope, and the advocacy for Black interreligious unity (Delany 2022, pp. 87, 89, 91, 182, 212; 2017, pp. 197, 259, 289). Thus, as the originator of this paradigm for writing that would later be classified under the umbrella term Afrofuturism, Delany was freed to explore ways that a violent revolution against slavery could be launched (Womack 2013, p. 122; Zamalin 2019, pp. 7, 21; Sneed 2021, p. 21). Rather than being restrained by the observable "facts" like Douglass and King, as Alex Zamalin put it: "Delany. . .provided the very architecture for how to articulate a radical black imagination beyond the possible. . ." (Zamalin 2019, p. 33.) This approach allows new theoretical ground to be covered and permits one to bypass the typical "conversation stopper" that proceeds from an orientation toward a particular understanding of "reality".

Beyond Douglass and King, there are more contemporary challenges to the utility of this approach. According to Zamalin, "we are told that utopian thought should be dismissed. For critics, it is either politically immature or morally dangerous. It should therefore be placed in the dustbin of history" (Zamalin 2019, p. 1). Alkalimat comes close to this perspective when he suggests that more scientific approaches to the future that are based on evidence from a materialist analysis of the facts of life are superior to the fantasy and "speculative guesswork", derived from idealists' perceptions of the world (Alkalimat 2022, pp. 11, 21, 47). For him, "without a materialist analysis of the actual contradictions in society, and on that basis finding the social forces able to resist and create change, the social transformation toward freedom will not take place" (Alkalimat 2022, p. 21). Thus, in this view, if the approach inaugurated by Delany serves any purpose, it is subordinate to those based on society as it is.

Other scholars, however, have acknowledged the political import of thinking that transcends the actual world. For example, Ytasha Womack, Walidah Imarisha, Nathan Hahn, and Zamalin, have all recognized the value in a theory that can unchain the mind, transcend familiar boundaries, dream new worlds, reimagine reality, and crack open the conceptual space one is barred from imagining (Womack 2013, pp. 15, 43; Imarisha 2015, p. 4; Hahn 2022, p. 58; Zamalin 2019, p. 12). This idealist thinking allows for theory-building relevant to political praxis. According to Zamalin, it gives one the tools to "test the value of our extant political formulations as it is a horizon toward which we might look to improve our lives" (Zamalin 2019, p. 6). For him, an idealist (or utopian) form of theoretical exploration "is a fruitful site for political theory. . .precisely [because] it lives on the precipice of human imagination, beyond the border of the possible. Utopia is a laboratory for our most radical desires and mines the recesses of our darkest longings" (Zamalin 2019, pp. 5, 6). Therefore, the present objective I intend to pursue gains credibility based on the arguments above.

However, to accomplish the task that has been set out, I will first expand on the framework upon which I argue one can gain access to Vesey's revolutionary religious perspective. This will consist of finally providing a definition for the term Afrofuturism and expounding on its concept of time, time travel, resurrection, and reincarnation. Subsequently, I will demonstrate how such concepts are grounded in an African-centered philosophical and religious perspective. This is important because part of my argument is that the exclusively materialist epistemology that shapes much contemporary Black political theory has jettisoned some of the resources from their African background that enables one to transcend the limitations of Eurocentric science. Following this, readers will be provided a brief introduction to Vesey and his plot. Finally, I will highlight four themes in Vesey's revolutionary religious perspective that can be conjured. The paper will then end with

some concluding remarks. Since there are no extant writings from Vesey, this study will utilize the only available sources that record statements attributed to him: the trial records for the plot and personal letters written by contemporaries with the events and that discuss the details (Schipper 2019; 2022, p. 6). Along with secondary sources, these documents support my claim that Vesey's revolutionary religious perspective can provide different options for Black people to consider as they continue to confront white supremacy.

2. Afrofuturism and African Religion as an African-Centered Philosophical Base for Theory Application

Afrofuturism and African religion can function as theoretical foundations from an African center, which one is able to apply to cultural, historical, and discursive material. Beginning with Afrofuturism, this section will define key terms and draw out important concepts that will be used to think about and benefit from Vesey's revolutionary plot.

2.1. Afrofuturism: Definition and Origins

Afrofuturism is an approach that aims to transcend, critique, and imagine the lived experience of Africana people beyond their present realities. Having its ideological origins in the "transcendent culture" of the enslaved who hoped to reach the promised land of freedom, the earliest proto-Afrofuturist texts were Delany's *Blake* (1859) and W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Comet* (1920) (Zamalin 2019, pp. 6, 7; Brooks and Pollock 2018; Lavender 2016; Grayson 2022, p. 8; Sneed 2021, pp. 7, 22). Nevertheless, it had its more contemporary beginning in the Black Arts movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The word to describe this phenomenon was coined in the early 1990s by writers such as Mark Dery (Anderson and Jones 2016, p. viii).

Because of its broad usage, there are various aspects of Afrofuturism that can help one identify it. According to Womack, "Afrofuturism is an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation" (Womack 2013, p. 9). It is the use of "science fiction, historical fiction, speculative fiction, fantasy, Afrocentricity, and magic realism", for the central ideal of liberation (Womack 2013, p. 9; See also, Murdock 2022, p. 52). In regard to this latter point, it must be emphasized that many scholars see Afrofuturism as fundamentally political. That is, to separate the political from Afrofuturism is to turn it into something altogether different (Gill 2022, p. 8; Imarisha 2015, pp. 3, 4; Sneed 2021, p. 132; Womack 2013, pp. 24, 42).

Beyond its overlapping and intricate bond with politics, some scholars have argued that Afrofuturism is religious, and in some cases, have defined it as a religion (Gill 2022, pp. 2–4; Sneed 2021, pp. 6, 132). This vision of the interweaving of artistic imagination, politics, and religion within Afrofuturism supports and substantiates Brandon McCormack's call for scholars of Black religious thought to give Afrofuturism more attention. He states, "Afrofuturism calls for more serious consideration [by scholars of African American religious and theological studies] of not only the songs and narratives of 'ancestors' and 'elders', but also the cultural productions, technological innovations and socio-political struggles of Black youth, and yet-to-be-born generations" (McCormack 2016, p. 8). In light of this challenge, I will wield Afrofuturism in the way described by Reynaldo Anderson and Charles Jones: as an applied theoretical approach (Anderson and Jones 2016, p. ix) to the current socio-political context.

2.2. Afrofuturism: Relevant Concepts

One of the concepts I draw from Afrofuturism is the idea of cyclical time. In fact, several scholars identify this as central to the theory. This is distinct from the linear approach to time found in other cultures (Brooks et al. 2016, p. 238; McLeod 2016, pp. 121–22). As a result, past, present, and future, can be meshed as one or transcended altogether. Robyn Maynard explains: "Afrofuturism provides us with new ways of rethinking and redefining the past, present, and future; it allows for historical methodologies fusing myth, science fiction, and realities of black oppression and resistance beyond the linear progress narrative

of the Enlightenment/apocalypse" (Maynard 2018, p. 33; See also, Womack 2013, p. 153). This form of liberation allows one to think in more creative ways about how to address the "present" and "future" by not necessarily seeing them as distinct from the past.

More specifically for the task at hand, Afrofuturism opens the theoretical space for thinkers to recast the past into the present/future. Womack informs readers that a common theme within African American culture in general, and the theory of Afrofuturism particularly, is the idea of "the past shadowing the present. . ." (Womack 2013, p. 153) Moreover, some writers have sought to use the past to look to the future; creating a sort of "past future" lens (Alkalimat 2022, p. 35; McLeod 2016, pp. 120–21). Thus, using this conceptual approach, below I will offer Vesey's revolutionary religious perspective as relevant and worthy of consideration in the current socio-political context.

Adopting this perspective helps Africana peoples contribute to religio-political theory pulling from an African-centered standpoint. An African-centered approach refers to a form of observation that is grounded in the assumption of the centrality of African ideals and values while being open to debate what constitutes those ideals and values (Asante 1992, pp. 6, 12). Rather than advocating a form of essentialism, this perspective allows me to admit, for example, that although there is some debate among scholars of African philosophy over the subject of time, I am convinced that the evidence supports the case that strict linear understandings of time are foreign to traditional African thought. At the very least, there is evidence in Africa and the African diaspora of a cyclical view of time and a particular emphasis on an orientation toward the past that presents it as possessing more ontological value than the present or the future.[5] This assertion supports the claim by theorists of Afrofuturism that its notion of time decenters non-African perspectives and recovers a view consistent with an African-centered approach (McLeod 2016, pp. 121–22; Anderson and Jones 2016, p. vii).

In addition to cyclical time and the notion of "past future", ideas such as time travel, resurrection, and reincarnation are overlapping concepts in Afrofuturism that can be covered together. Womack notes that time travel is a dominating theme among Afrofuturists. Literary forms of Afrofuturism are ripe with examples where people have access to time dive machines, experience endless cycles of rebirth, and examples of people stuck in cycles of reincarnation (Womack 2013, p. 154; Amani 2016, pp. 57–58; Spriggs 2016, p. 139; Hand 2016, p. 140; McPhatter 2016, pp. 150–51). Similar instances can be seen in musical and performing arts where sampling allows for a kind of technological immortality, and holographic performances can function as a vehicle for time travel where "visual reincarnations" of "digitally resurrected prophets" such as Tupac, at 2012 Coachella Festival, gave him the ability to transcend death (McLeod 2016, pp. 109–11, 113, 114, 116, 121–22). This capability to "call back" spirits from the dead and their capacity to return to empower artists to obtain skills and/or talents from those in the past is analogous to conjure (summoning spiritual beings/powers for assistance), trance (transcending "everyday consciousness" through divine guidance; for example, ancestral spirit possession), and the role of ancestors (ancestral reincarnation and empowerment) in African(a) religions (Chireau 2003, pp. 14, 15, 29, 32; Kalu 2000, pp. 54–56; Smith 2012, p. 126; Castor 2021, p. 79; Young 1992, p. 119; 1993, p. 22; Henry 2000; Mbiti 1999, pp. 26, 147–48, 158–59, 167; Hill 2021, pp. 24, 27, 28, 31, 39; Obenga 2004, pp. 230, 233, 240–41; Ani 1997, pp. 8–9; Perez 2011, pp. 331, 346). These parallels with Africana religion, once again, supports the African-centered approach of this project.

Having pieced and weaved together these tools from Afrofuturism and African religion I am able to move forward with my task on more solid ground. The idea of "past future" permits the recasting of Vesey's revolutionary religious perspective to the present socio-political context through time travel. Furthermore, I can assert the need and/or possibility of conjuring Vesey for access to the power of his religio-political philosophy. In other words, Afrofuturism would allow me to, in a sense, respond to the character from Delany's *Blake*, who said "many a day I been prayin' dat de Laud sen' a nudder Denmark 'mong us!" that his prayers can be answered (Delany 2022, p. 196). Moreover, to insist on

the need for his reincarnation in present-day Black political theorists so that they can be possessed by his revolutionary religious perspective is justified.

3. Vesey's Plot

The leader and organizer of the largest insurrectionary plot of the enslaved in the United States was born in either St. Thomas or Guinea around 1767. Going by the name Telemaque, at age 14 he was among the 390 enslaved people Captain Joseph Vesey acquired in 1781 from St. Thomas. No more than three months after being sold to an enslaver in St. Domingo, Telemaque was returned to Captain Vesey and refunded for being "unsound" because he would apparently have epileptic fits. As a result, he became Captain Vesey's personal assistant on the slave ship for two years and was renamed Denmark. Furthermore, he would remain enslaved to him for another 17 years (Hamilton 2022, p. 129; Lofton 1964, pp. 10–11, 14, 15–17; Robertson 2000, pp. 29, 30). Circumstances would change for the better when he won a cash prize in the East-Bay-Street Lottery that gave him enough money to purchase his freedom and have some left over. He was known to be an avid Bible reader, a leader in the African church, a master of several languages, and as a free Black carpenter he would become one of the wealthiest Black men in Charleston, South Carolina (Hamilton 2022, p. 130; Harding 1981, p. 66; Robinson 2005, p. 361; Aptheker 2020, p. 269; Robertson 2000, p. 43).

During the year 1818, in the wake of two decades of several planned uprisings by the Black majority population in Charleston, Denmark Vesey began organizing a revolt that was scheduled to commence in 1822. Having likely been exposed to the ideas of enslaved people brought over by French refugees fleeing the revolution of the enslaved in St. Domingue who arrived in Charleston, Vesey began meeting with his chief lieutenants: Gullah Jack Pritchard, Ned and Rolla Bennett, Monday Gell, and Peter Poyas (Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 182, 223; Killens 1970, p. ix; Genovese 1976, p. 593; Lofton 1964, pp. 33, 48, 69, 70, 71–72, 108, 116; Robertson 2000, pp. 4, 42, 52, 55; Harding 1981, p. 68). Nevertheless, in 1822 Vesey was arrested on June 22nd, stood trial on June 27th, sentenced to death on June 28th, and was hanged on July 2nd (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 183; Schipper 2022, p. 19; Robertson 2000, pp. 86–87, 105).

There are two identifiable triggers that led Vesey to begin planning an insurrection. First, evidence points to the enslavement of his children as a motive for Vesey's plot. The trial transcript records one of the main leaders asserting that he had heard Vesey state that he wanted to do something about the enslavement of his children (Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 190–91). Secondly, the forced closure of the church he was a member and class leader at also helped to spark Vesey's desire to revolt. After three-fourths of the Black Methodists left the white churches in 1818 Charleston and began to establish independent Black congregations, they experienced multiple forms of harassment and repression from the city. Vesey joined the Hampstead church, which was one of the three churches that made up the independent African Association of Methodists in Charleston. The city broke up meetings, jailed, banished, and publicly whipped individuals from these Black churches. In 1818, 140 members of Vesey's church were arrested for violating the prohibition on enslaved people receiving instruction without a white person present (Lofton 1964, pp. 92–94; Robertson 2000, p. 46; Harding 1981, pp. 66, 67–68). The church was eventually closed and, utilizing his position as a class leader, Vesey started meeting with discontented people at his home. By pointing to the church closure, he began encouraging revolt using the Bible to support his plan (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 178; Robertson 2000, p. 46; Harding 1981, p. 68).

According to court testimony, the goal of the revolt was to take the country. Scheduled for July 14th (then changed to June 16th), they planned to accomplish this task by seizing the arsenal, setting fires around the city, completely slaughtering the entire white population, and then sailing to St. Domingue (Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 165, 166–67, 169, 179, 234; Johnson 1970b, p. 72; Schipper 2022, p. 1; Robertson 2000, pp. 4, 62). Gaining the arsenal was of upmost strategic importance because, as one contemporary of the plot stated

in a letter, "...all the arms on the Neck were deposited in one place—to which a negro had access and was to deliver the key—700 stand of muskets would also...been in their power—& there was enough powder ready at hand..." (Potter 1970c, p. 79) Access to these items would allow them to supply others with arms and burn the city down to its foundations (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 171; Robertson 2000, p. 5).

Extensive preparation went into this plot. The sources confirm that between 6000 and 9000 people were recruited to participate in the insurrection ((Evidence Document B (Senate Copy) (1822) 2022, pp. 280–81); Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 183, 211; Robinson 2005, p. 361; James 2012, pp. 53–54). Moreover, while the trial transcript and a personal letter by a contemporary both support the assertion that leadership in the plot wrote letters to Haiti (formerly St. Domingue) seeking assistance, scholars disagree on whether they received a reply (Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 237, 243; Johnson 1970a, p. 73; Aptheker 2020, p. 272; James 2012, pp. 53–54; Robertson 2000, pp. 4, 68; Harding 1981, p. 68). Nevertheless, several people affiliated with the plot had stolen either a gun, sword, a powder keg, or items to create pike poles from enslavers. They even had wigs and whiskers made for disguises (Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 222, 233, 234, 257; Potter 1970b, p. 75). In addition to these provisions, they also made use of traditional African religious forms, such as charms, to support their armed struggle (Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 182, 198, 199, 212; Robertson 2000, p. 67).

Yet, even with all this preparation, the plan was thwarted through betrayal. On 25 May 1822, a house slave named Peter Prioleau revealed the plot to his friend, a free Black man named William Pencil. Pencil told him to immediately reveal the plot to his enslaver, and he did. Based on the description of the man Prioleau described as the recruiter for the revolt, an enslaved man named William Paul was arrested and examined on 31 May. By 8 June, Paul had told the authorities everything he knew about the plot and even named some of its key leaders. Nevertheless, those questioned were able to keep their composure and successfully deceived the authorities. On that same day, however, a man named George Wilson was approached about the plot and five days later he told his enslaver (Robertson 2000, pp. 70–75; Schipper 2022, p. 18; Aptheker 2020, p. 271).

Consequently, the plot was uncovered, arrests were made, executions were carried out, and additional repressive measures were applied to the local Black population. By the end of August 1822, the court had been adjourned, and 131 Black people had been arrested, 93 were put on trial, 67 convicted, 43 were banished (some were banished even though they were not found guilty), 35 were executed, and 26 had been acquitted (Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 259, 270; Spady 2011, p. 287; Killens 1970, pp. xviii, xix; Robertson 2000, p. 105; Schipper 2022, p. 1). Furthermore, the reprisals also included limitations on the freedom of movement of Charleston's enslaved population, calls for the expulsion of free Black individuals, and the burning of the remains of Vesey's former place of worship on the order of the city (Lawrence-Saunders 2022, p. 186; Spady 2011, pp. 287–88; Robertson 2000, p. 106).

Based on the apparent failure and negative effects of planned insurrections such as Vesey's, scholars and thinkers have debated the legitimacy and/or utility of attempted revolts of the enslaved in the context of the United States (Genovese 1976, pp. 588, 591, 595; Lawrence-Saunders 2022, pp. 185, 186, 190–94, 211; Robertson 2000, p. 131; Douglass 2022c, p. 519; Douglass 1994a, p. 760; King 2000a, p. 147; King 2010c, p. 96). It is acknowledged by some that (attempted) revolts of the enslaved served the important role of benefiting the psychological condition of the enslaved, disrupting the racist narrative of docile, passive, and content enslaved people, instilling the fear of imminent death in enslavers, causing the amelioration of material conditions of the enslaved to discourage resentment, and serving as an important symbolic event in the cause of freedom (Robertson 2000, pp. 73–74; Lawrence-Saunders 2022, pp. 205, 207, 209; Douglass 1994b, pp. 64, 65; Genovese 1976, pp. 595, 596; Cobb 2016, p. 5; Blight 2018, p. 305). In agreement with these points, I am calling for the conjuring of Vesey's revolutionary religious perspective.

Vesey's Revolutionary Religious Perspective

In this section I will briefly highlight four aspects of Vesey's revolutionary religious perspective, based on statements attributed to him and his co-conspirators, that should be conjured because of their potential to push the pursuit of Black liberation further toward its accomplishment. It must be emphasized here that the motive, justification, recruitment, and planning of Vesey's plot were fundamentally tied to religion. For example, one white teenager, whose shop Vesey had frequented, stated that Denmark Vesey's "general conversation was about religion which he would apply to slavery, as for instance, he would speak of the creation of the world, in which he would say all men had equal rights, blacks as well as whites, &c. all his religious remarks were mingled with slavery" (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 183). This testimony is consistent with other contemporary reports that suggest that the plot meetings were held under the cover of religion and that the whole African Church was involved (Beach 2022b, p. 408; Potter 1970a, p. 75; Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 176). Therefore, what we find is that religion was far from a peripheral element of the plot. To the contrary, Vesey's engagement with religion was a central component of his recruiting and gave him the ability to "preach an apocalyptic rhetoric that made powerless men willing to fight for their freedom" (Robertson 2000, p. 47. See also, Schipper 2022, pp. 3, 5). Thus, the principles that must be conjured are not merely "religious" or "political", but are essentially religio-political.

The first religio-political element of Vesey's revolutionary religious perspective that must be resurrected for the contemporary moment is his aim of revolutionary, rather than the internal change of the state. He was not under the illusion that people of African descent would receive justice in the United States through small changes within the racist system of government. Instead, Vesey sought to "take the country" (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 234). That is, he was not merely concerned with liberating Black people in his local community but in the whole United States. This goal was shared by other participants in the plot who wanted to reenact the Haitian Revolution (Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 188–89).

Moreover, if contemporary Black theorists are to be possessed with the spirit of Vesey, there is a need for an awareness that white people will not allow the overthrow of their government through peaceful means. Instead of trying to shame or persuade white people into emancipating enslaved Africans, Vesey was ready to "fight the white people" (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 234).In other words, the type of revolution he had in mind was a violent one. This posture places Black freedom in the hands of Black people rather than the "goodwill" of white people. Along with other Africana thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Vesey seems to have concluded that there can be no compromise with enslavers; violence is the only answer (Fanon 2004, p. 23).

Adopting this radical approach to religio-political praxis would seem immoral in the context of many religious communities in the United States. This, however, can be attributed to the fact that religion is often deployed to preserve and protect the nation. For this reason, many cannot conceive of a religio-political posture that is not in service to the state. Consequently, conjuring the "spirit" of Vesey to reincarnate Black (religio) political theorists is imperative if alternative approaches to anti-Black violence will be considered.

Secondly, Vesey's focus on using various means, including religion, to revolutionize Black people is another principle from his religio-political theory that must be conjured. Because moral suasion was not pursued as an option, Vesey was able to concentrate his knowledge on stirring up the revolutionary fervor among Black people. For example, one man on trial for his alleged participation in the Vesey plot testified: "If it had not been for the cunning of that old villain Vesey, I should not now be in my present situation. He employed every stratagem to induce me to join him" (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 214). Vesey placed a lot of effort in convincing Black people to use violence in response to their oppression. While this man's testimony seems to be more concerned with deflecting his guilt onto Vesey, others testified to a similar zeal in his attempt to persuade Black people to his cause.

Another encounter recounted in court testimony demonstrates the level of attention Vesey put into his conversations with potential rebels: "I was one day on horseback going to Market when I met him [Vesey] on foot; he asked me if I was satisfied in my present situation; if I remembered the fable of Hercules and the Waggoner whose wagon was stalled, and he began to pray, and Hercules said, you fool put your shoulders to the wheel, whip up the horses and your wagon will be pulled out; that if we did not put our hand to the work and deliver ourselves, we should never come out of slavery. . .[W]e must not stand with our hands in our pockets. . ." (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 164). Stated differently, Vesey declared that if Black people were to gain their freedom, they would have to liberate themselves instead of crying out for help. In fact, he chastised Black people who cowered before white people (Aptheker 2020, p. 270).

Beyond his use of the persuasive power of literature, Vesey also utilized the Bible to convince Black people to join his plot. Analyzing Vesey's use of the Biblical text, Hebrew Bible scholar, Jeremy Schipper, states that "[d]uring class meetings without white people in attendance, Vesey was not simply identifying biblical texts that would help to make a scriptural case against slavery. He was identifying the biblical roles and plotlines that he exhorted his fellow conspirators to enact" (Schipper 2022, p. 40). Thus, Vesey did not see his task consisting of the dual attempt of transforming white people and containing the radicalism of Black people. He simply made use of various means to gain acceptance for his religio-political theory among Black people.

This form of political theory pushed Black people to depend on a force that went beyond conventional forms of resistance bound by the rules of those in power: Black people's own will. Rather than waiting around for enough white people to feel pity on them or for legislation to pass while the next Breonna Taylor or George Floyd is killed, Vesey's revolutionary perspective would provide African Americans more options for confronting anti-Black violence. Being possessed by this "spirit" from Vesey would save a lot of the mental energy in Black politics that is spent on moral suasion.

Thirdly, Vesey's plot was an interreligious Pan-African (political unity of all people of African descent) project. For example, not only did Vesey hope for help from both Africa and Haiti (formerly St. Domingo), but he also used Haiti's successful revolution as a symbol of the power of Black unity for his own plot. One witness testified that Vesey would read to him everything in the newspaper about St. Domingue frequently (Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 164, 182, 214). Vesey taught that Black people were "fully able to conquer the whites, if we were only unanimous and courageous, as the St. Domingo people were" (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 178). This unity among Black people was vital for Vesey; it was necessary for victory over their oppressors. Therefore, he encouraged his followers to take their unity to the grave: "we must unite together as the St. Domingo people did, never to betray one another; and to die before we would tell upon one another" (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 166). This type of unity required participants to look past differences among the Black population.

Vesey sought to bind Black people from distinct national and religious backgrounds. Many who were African-born and those formerly enslaved in St. Domingue were participants in the plot (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 236; Lofton 1964, p. 138; Robertson 2000, p. 10). Furthermore, Vesey allowed the use of Christianity and African-derived spiritual themes/practices to be employed (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 198; Robertson 2000, p. 47). As Eugene Genovese explains, "Vesey seems to have come closest to formulating a flexible religious appeal based on the folk religion and both African and classical Christian ideas and appeals. . . [He] most creatively captured the complex tradition of the people he sought to lead" (Genovese 1976, p. 594). Similarly, Yvonne Chireau asserts that "[t]he prominence of. . .Conjure practitioners as leaders in the Vesey plot suggests that African-based spirituality and supernatural traditions did not present a conflict for the other conspirators" (Chireau 2003, p. 67). In the context of oppression, the nationality or religion of a fellow insurrectionist should not hinder unity.

Interreligious Pan-African unity may be the most important aspect of Vesey's religio-political philosophy that needs to be conjured to empower Africana people today. Just like Vesey, global Pan-Africanism that includes Africa and its diaspora will serve African Americans well if they decide to make use of alternative political means beyond limitations set by our oppressors. Commitments to nation-states or ethnic identities at the expense of Pan-African unity weakens our collective power. Vesey understood the importance of being culturally eclectic and open to different perspectives. However, oppressors are skillful at manipulating our differences to cause divisions. Moreover, the comforts of Western society have negatively affected the priorities we place on political unity across ethnic, national, and religious lines. Resurrecting Vesey's spirit would eliminate these ills.

The fourth principle that must be conjured from Vesey's revolutionary religious perspective is his belief in divine approval (and imperative) to kill those who participate in anti-Black violence and oppression. After giving instructions to his followers to kill their oppressors, Vesey "then read in the Bible where God commanded, that all should be cut off, both men, women and children, and said he believed, it was no sin for us to do so for the Lord had commanded us to do it" (Kennedy and Parker 2022, pp. 166–67). For him, the Bible required God-fearing people to kill their oppressors (Schipper 2022, pp. 31–32).

As one might imagine, there was some opposition to certain aspects of this directive even among those committed to the revolt. For example, during one of the meetings in preparation to the plot, it is reported that "some of the company were opposed to killing the Ministers, and the women and children. . . " (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 167). Yet, Vesey responded that "it was not safe to keep one alive, but to destroy them totally, for you see, said he, the Lord has commanded it" (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 167). Although an attack on non-combatants and those who have not (and cannot) carry out anti-Black violence or oppression is not a part of his theory that I am lifting up for contemporary consideration, the divine sanction to kill oppressors should be preserved. To give an example, if African Americans see a person of any social rank or status suffocating another African American to death, the spirit of Vesey would permit them to take steps beyond protesting to save that individual's life.

However, just as African Americans today would face opposition for encouraging any form of violent response to anti-Black violence, Vesey also faced Black and white contemporaries who condemned his methods altogether. One man declared that the uprising was a "great sin" (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 216). According to another individual that was approached about joining the rebellion, God prohibited killing (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 162). With an even stronger tone of denunciation, white people were united in their presentation of Vesey as a religious fanatic and false prophet who twisted the Bible for his evil purposes (Lawrence-Saunders 2022, pp. 188–89). Take for instance the statement of the court toward Vesey during his sentencing. They declared that Vesey sought to disregard divine laws and participate in violence and anarchy as opposed to the Gospel that leads one to peace. Moreover, the court told Vesey "It is difficult to imagine what infatuation could have prompted you to attempt an enterprize so wild and visionary. You were a free man; were comparatively wealthy; and enjoyed every comfort, compatible with your situation. You had, therefore, much to risk, and little to gain. From your age and experience, you ought to have known, that success was impracticable" (Kennedy and Parker 2022, p. 184. See also, Ibid., pp. 184, 185). It is ironic that defenders of the violent system of slavery condemned Vesey's plot based on the notion that peace is a Gospel virtue. Nevertheless, despite these critiques, it is noteworthy that Vesey went to his death in silence (Beach 2022a, p. 374; Robertson 2000, p. 103). This silence, however, makes a significant contribution to his religio-political theory. Vesey's silence communicates the fact that as long as they possess divine approval, Africana people do not owe their oppressors any explanation for their use of lethal force in response to anti-Black violence.

4. Conclusions

This article set out to present and apply theories from Afrofuturism and traditional African religion to contemporary Black religious and socio-political theory. I began by first providing some background on the marginalization of revolutionary violence from Black religio-political theory. This was accomplished by highlighting the similarities and differences between two towering figures from the 19th and 20th centuries. While they disagreed on the morality of revolutionary violence, both agreed that the scientific facts of the circumstances made revolution impractical. I then pointed to Afrofuturism and traditional African religion as offering alternative epistemologies from the Eurocentric perspective that limits reality to the material, measurable, scientific world. I made the case that taking an African-centered perspective freed one to consider "past future" conceptions of time, time travel, resurrection, reincarnation, conjure, and trance as legitimate ways of reflecting on options to confront white supremacy in the contemporary world.

Utilizing Afrofuturism and traditional African religion, I was able to assert the need to conjure Denmark Vesey's revolutionary religious perspective today. After providing a brief history of Vesey and his plot, I pointed to his revolutionary goal, his focus on revolutionizing Black people, his interreligious Pan-African perspective, and his belief in divine sanction for killing oppressors as important qualities that need to be conjured and reincarnated in present Black religio-political theorists. This posture toward Black politics would help us break free from the limitations prescribed by liberals and those invested more in the preservation of the state than Black liberation.

Conjuring Vesey would also allow us to transcend our own self limitations. While some may see the scientific "facts" of the "real" world and view them as barriers, Afrofuturism allows us to go further than the evidence permits. This dynamic may become clear when considering the hymn entitled, *We've Come This Far by Faith*. While it does imply some concern for the future when it tells listeners not to be discouraged when trouble comes in their life. However, the emphasis is on a recognition on where one has arrived and how he or she accomplished it (Goodson 2001, p. 412). The 'this' in the title points to something already possessed; a place (*this* far) one has already arrived. Nevertheless, I would like to problematize the grammatical structure and integrity of the title of the hymn to represent an epistemological disjuncture from what is observable (*this*), to that which is beyond. In this way, "That Further by Faith" intimates not merely a riff on a classic hymn, but a philosophical reorientation in Black religio-political theory.

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Notes

[1] According to T. J. Desh-Obi, during precolonial times central African warriors always conducted precombat rituals to invoke the power of spiritual forces in preparation for battle. More specifically, he argues that in the Kongo-Angolan tradition, combat is inseparable from religion. This was no different for the ritual used to train soldiers called *engolo*. Through this circling dance, the practioners are said to receive power from their ancestors. For more on this, see (Desch-Obi 2005, pp. 70, 71, 75, 78).

[2] Desh-Obi argues that enlaved African warriors and their descendants maintained the understanding of the need for "spiritual preparation for combat". For this reason, the martial art style called capoeira Angola (a continuation of *engolo* from West Central Africa [see note 2]) maintained its link to the sacred. This blending of religion and violent resistance was not limted to Brazil, but was present in the Haitian Revolution as well. For more on this see (Desch-Obi 2005, pp. 72, 73, 76; Fandrich 2005, p. 188).

[3] Although I recognize the existence of people of African descent throughout the Americas who can be rightfully considered African Americans, my use of the phrase here and following will be exclusively referencing people of African descent whose ancestors were brought to the region now known as the United States through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade

[4] Douglass directly confronted the question about the morality of killing an enslaver in 1854 where he provides a cogent defense of lethal violent resistance among the enslaved using the grammar of Christianity. Two years earlier he had spoke approvingly on the American Revolutionaries for their preference for revolution over peaceful submission. Finally, it must be noted that Douglass himself used violence to resist his slave-breaker Covey and spoke of the positive psychological effects it had on his eventual attainment of freedom. For more on Douglass' defense of the morality of violent resistance and his own use of the method, see (Douglass 1994b, pp. 64–65; 2018b, p. 64; 2022b, pp. 221–23).

[5] Within African philosophy, the claim by John Mbiti that traditional African societies had a limited view of the future has caused several rejoinders by scholars in African philosophy. However, Lewis Gordon has convincingly argued that in traditional African societies, the past held a superior level of importance. For more on this debate, along with evidence for the greater ontological weight of the past and the cyclical view of time among Africana peoples, see, (Mbiti 1999, pp. 16–17, 21; Asante 1992, pp. 84, 96; Hallen 2002, p. 16; Wiredu 2006, p. 9; Gordon 2008, pp. 132–33, 202, 203; Hill 2021, pp. 24, 31; Perez 2011, pp. 333, 336; Ani 1997, pp. 7–9; Obenga 2004, p. 564).

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