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"Show me the face you had before your parents were born" : African-American New Thought ministers and 'The Black interior'

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Before Your Parents Were Born":
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ABSTRACT

This theoretical research critically explores the phenomenon of contemporary African Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities that are not bound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity. It examines the work and ideas of three African-American New thought ministers who articulate a vision of liberation that is predicated on the cultivation of an interior spiritual identity beyond the social world. This research employs two theoretical frameworks that may help to shed light on the reasons for and implications of contemporary African Americans constructing their identities in this manner. The first of these theoretical frameworks is sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2013) notion of "color-blind racism" which asserts that in the aftermath of Jim Crow racism, elusive forms of racism have emerged, couched in the rhetoric of post-racial color-blindness. The second theoretical framework is the concept of the "post-civil rights condition," and related formulations, summarized by philosopher Paul Taylor (2007). This discourse posits that the political imperatives that previously pre-figured black identity and life trajectories have loosened, resulting in a level of social differentiation within the black community that was not socially permissible during a previous era. Together, these theoretical frameworks help to illuminate the extent to which the views of the African-American New Thought ministers may paradoxically advance contemporary denial of racism and also signal black individuals' capacities to adapt and redefine themselves under changing social conditions. This research may challenge assumptions reflected in existing black identity development models, such as the Black Identity Development model advanced by Bailey Jackson (2012), by

illustrating the growing diversity of black self-definition not reflected in existing models. Given

the reliance on social identity development models within the field of clinical social work, this

research may have significant implications for clinical work with black client populations.

"SHOW ME THE FACE YOU HAD BEFORE YOUR PARENTS WERE BORN":
AFRICAN-AMERICAN NEW THOUGHT MINISTERS AND 'THE BLACK INTERIOR'

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submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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CHAPTER I
Introduction

In his seminal work *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. DuBois (1903) offers a meditation on the unique confluence of existential and political demands faced by the African-American population at the turn of the twentieth century. In his canonical question, "How does it feel to be a problem?," he implored his audience to consider not only the political exigencies that shaped black life and but also the complex ways in which the racist social schemata of the day had crept into the very psychic worlds of black people (DuBois, 1903, p. 7). For DuBois (1903), the power-laden process through which black subjectivity is formed culminates in a form of divided attention which he terms "double consciousness" (p. 12). Though the notion of double consciousness has also been interpreted as an asset that equips African Americans with a kind of expanded vision that illuminates some of the moral discrepancies that inhere in American racial democracy, DuBois also identifies this doubleness as one that torments the psyches of individual black people, resulting in a series of enduring and interconnected existential dilemmas. In *The Sovereignty of Quiet,* black cultural studies scholar Kevin Quashie (2012) reiterates the significance of DuBois' thought but also problematizes the notion of double consciousness, identifying it as a formulation which privileges exterior political pressures in the construction of an individual black person's self-identity and "conceptualizes black subjectivity as conflict with whiteness...imagines black agency only in/as resistance" (p. 12). Further, Quashie observes:

> "This is the politics of representation, where black subjectivity exists for its social and political meaningfulness rather than as a marker of the human individuality of the person who is black. As an identity, blackness is always supposed to tell us something about race and racism, or about America, or violence and struggle and triumph or poverty and hopefulness. The determination to see blackness only through a social public lens, as if there were no inner life, is racist--it comes from the language of racial superiority and is a practice intended to dehumanize black people. But it has also been adopted by black culture, especially in terms of

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nationalism, but also more generally: it creeps into the consciousness of the black subject, especially the artist, as the imperative to represent." (p. 4)

Quashie 's (2012) concerns about the limitations of double consciousness as the dominant paradigm for understanding black self-making ultimately leads him to call for a move from double consciousness to a "consciousness of surrender" (p. 41) that reflects a "balance between an awareness of the exterior world, and a self authorized by an agency that extends beyond that world" (p. 43).

In a discussion of the ideas of the French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty titled "Inside and Outside: Ontological Considerations," Galen A. Johnson (1999) laments the manner in which exteriority has been privileged over and against interiority within modern western intellectual history. He considers the ways that Merleau-Ponty's philosophical formulation of "the flesh" might help to shed light on the neglected significance of the interior (Johnson, 1999, p. 27, 31). In an overt challenge to a philosophical orthodoxy that asserts the primacy of the exterior without need for qualification, Johnson (1999) opines:

> "There is an inner life. It is the life of thought, the life of the heart, the life of dream and memory. There are interiors that encounter lines of exterior force that shape, fold, or break them…It is philosophically difficult to speak of interiority in light of the weight of the outside. Image dominates word, information replaces thought, and either interiors are erased or they are so reduced in significance as to command only marginal philosophical attention." (p. 26)

Returning to the manner in which the tension between interiority and exteriority surfaces within contemporary black cultural discourse in particular, African-American poet and literature professor Elizabeth Alexander (2004) has explored what she terms "the black interior" in her book by the same name in an effort to restore it to the black social imaginary. Alexander (2004) defines the black interior as

> "a metaphysical space beyond the black public everyday toward power and wild imagination that black people ourselves know we possess but need to be

reminded of...a space that black people ourselves have policed at various historical moments. Tapping into this black imaginary helps us envision what we are not meant to envision: complex black selves." (p. xi)

Further, Alexander (2004) articulates what is at stake in her vision of black interiority when she states that "the contagion of racism seeps into the intimate realms of the subconscious and affects how black people ourselves see and imagine who we are" (p. 4-5). In light of this, Alexander (2004) states that she is, then, interested in "the complex and often unexplored interiority beyond the face of the social self" and that "[i]f black people in the mainstream imaginary exist as fixed properties deemed 'real,' what is possible in the space we might call surreal?" (p. 4-5). The invocation of the "surreal," in this context-- that which subverts or lies outside of the pressures of black hypervisibility and publicity—helps to introduce the necessarily spiritual or numinous dimensions of this call to inhabit and embrace an interior sense of self, or a self that is not visible to others.

The longstanding privileging of the exterior that is present in the concept of DuBoisian double consciousness, for example, and has been taken up by Quashie (2012), Johnson (1999), and Alexander (2004) in slightly different registers contribute to a longstanding discourse within black social thought concerning the kind of chronic invisibility produced by the hypervisibility accorded to black bodies. In addition to the concept of doubleness, the trope of masking has also long been central to black cultural discourse concerning the problem of visibility. Paul Laurence Dunbar's (1902) poem "We Wear the Mask" has come to represent this trope within the African-American literary canon:

"We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,--
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be otherwise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
     We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
     We wear the mask!" (p. 112-3)

In his analysis, Quashie (2012) observes that Dunbar's poem "says little about the interior of the masked subject" and that "there is little quality of an inner life to be found in the poem's response to racism and, at best, one can infer only that the wearer of the mask is either pained and rageful, or deceiving," thus providing a flattened, caricatured vision of the black subject (p. 17). Though a detailed exploration of the trope of masking is beyond the scope of this research, Quashie (2012) summarizes the limitations of masking stating that "the intent of black subjectivity is always toward a political discourse of oppression, and never toward its own human vagary" (p. 17). In *Masks: Blackness, Race and the Imagination*, Adam Lively (2000) suggests that the mask is a trope for "attacking and subverting white values" and that "[i]n the face of white surveillance, blacks' principal weapon in this cultural war was humor, and the indirection allowed by disguise or mask" (p. 5). Further, Lively (2000) states that "for a whole series of twentieth-century writers, blackness has been expressive of the sense that one must wear a mask before the world" (p. 238).

The stated need to mask oneself that arises from external social pressures has emerged as not only a literary device but as a framework for conceptualizing black psychology. As part of a larger psychoanalytic investigation of black psychology under conditions of colonization, Afro-French psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon also offers numerous helpful insights into the

problem of masking in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967). Fanon (1967) utilizes a psychoanalytic

framework to explore the manner in which black individuals living under white colonization

seek to imitate the behavior and cultural practices of the white colonizer, suggesting that this

results in many black people under colonial rule donning white masks. In this work, Fanon

(1967) ultimately calls for black people to cast off such masks and realize one's fundamental

agency to define oneself. Though he captures the basic dilemma of inhabiting a black body

under conditions of colonization in his statement, "I am overdetermined from without," he

nevertheless asserts that "I am not the slave of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own

appearance" (Fanon, 1967, p. 116).

Within the context of contemporary African-American cultural politics, the question of

how to craft one's identity to best respond to the pressures imposed by the social world while

also retaining some sense of sense of self "authorized", as Quashie put it, "by an agency that

extends beyond [the social] world" (p. 43) remains an ever-present question. Indeed, a growing

body of literature within the field of black cultural studies suggests that more and more black

people may be tending toward an understanding of self that de-centers a black racial identity in

favor of an identity beyond the realm of the social (Taylor, 2007). However, popular black

identity development models have not been revised to account for these changes.

This notion that a number of African Americans might seek to de-center a black racial

identity dictated by the outside and, instead, center an identity grounded in the unseen represents

a departure from popular black identity development models. In Jackson's seminal paper, "Black

Identity Development: Influences of Culture and Social Oppression" (2012) he revisits his

longstanding and evolving Black Identity Development model, explaining that his underlying

aim is to identify "the levels/stages of consciousness that Black people tend to follow in the

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development of their Racial/Black identity," pinpointing five stages of identity development: naïve, acceptance, resistance, redefinition, and internalization (p. 38-47). In the culminating "internalization" stage, the person overcomes the need to "explain, defend, or protect their Black identity" and considers how their social identity is shaped by intersectionality—that is, the manner in which different forms of social identity (such as race and gender) converge to inform a particular individual or group's experience in the social world (Jackson, 2012, p. 46-47). Jackson (2007) also suggests that there may be room for the elaboration of his model beyond its present iteration in stating: "It is not clear what might follow an Internalization stage" and that "[i]n all previous iterations of BID (Black Identity Development), Internalization represents the final stage, the assumption being that when one reached this stage, the process of developing a full and healthy Black identity was complete" (p. 46). Further, he explains that "[t]he way of describing the arrival at the stage was presented by focusing on the ways in which the person had internalized her or his new sense of blackness into all the roles that she or he played in life" (Jackson 2012, p. 46-7). He writes that the concepts that he advances regarding the incorporation of intersectionality into the final stage of development will "require the scrutiny of research that uses various methodologies to establish the validity of these changes in BID" (Jackson, 2012, p. 47). This suggests that though Jackson has not currently elaborated a stage beyond the Internalization stage, he seems to be aware that there are dimensions of black identity that have yet to be explicated in the literature that will inevitably alter black identity development frameworks in the future.

Though considering intersectionality in this final stage might effectively de-center blackness as one's primary identity to make room for other equally salient domains of social identity such as religion, Jackson's (2012) ubiquitous identity development model does not seem

to adequately capture the sense of identity expressed in the views of a growing cadre of black artists and public figures—a sense of identity that is authorized by a domain beyond the social, to employ the language of Quashie (2012). Central to the concerns of this research are the ideas of three African-American New Thought ministers for whom the cultivation of a universal spiritual identity that is beyond the social world is central to the project of liberation and social progress. Given the popularity of this New Thought spiritual framework within the African-American community, it seems crucial that those theorizing black identity development inquire into both the reasons for and implications of this emerging form of identity within the African-American community. It is important to note that within the spiritual philosophy of these New Thought congregations, liberation is not specifically defined by a desire to dismantle white supremacy or achieve other social goals that might be associated with the concept of black liberation in other contexts. Instead, these New Thought spiritual communities understand liberation as a process wherein each individual turns inward and seizes his or her true spiritual identity unencumbered by social scripts and histories. These communities do, however, engage in various social service and activist projects which seek to actualize social goals, such as wealth redistribution and land stewardship. Indeed, the leaders of this spiritual community posit that when individuals recognize their fundamentally spiritual identity and ground their actions in this awareness, a better social world becomes possible. The liberation sought by this community is principally liberation from the illusions and distractions that impede the individual's conscious connection to divinity and not liberation from a specific sociopolitical institution, practice, or system.

This theoretical research critically explores the phenomenon of contemporary African Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities that are not bound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity. It will employ two theoretical frameworks that may help to

shed light on the reasons for and implications of African-American spiritual figures and their followers seeking to advance this identity unbound by the demands of the social. The first of these theoretical frameworks is sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2013) notion of "color-blind racism" which considers the manner in which the ascendancy of post-racial, color-blind ideology and conceptions of identity have emerged in both white and non-white communities to maintain fundamentally racist social structures. This theoretical framework may offer one explanation for the development and, possibly oppressive, social functions of this principally spiritual identity beyond racial identity. The second theoretical framework that may help to elucidate some of the reasons for and implications of African Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities that are not bound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity is the concept of the "post-civil rights condition," and related formulations, summarized by philosopher Paul Taylor (2007, p. 626)—concepts that have, together, informed the analysis of social phenomena within the field of black cultural studies for the last two decades. This discourse posits that the political imperatives that previously pre-figured black identity and life trajectories have loosened, resulting in an assortment of lifestyles, forms of identity, and social visions within the black community that were not previously socially permissible or widespread. This theoretical framework may help to illuminate why this form of spiritual, non-racial identity has emerged and what some of its broader social implications might be.

This research concerning the identities and visions of liberation of African-American individuals aligned with the New Thought spiritual movement may support the expansion of existing black identity development models by illustrating the growing diversity of black self-definition and the array of futures for which black individuals yearn. Much of the scholarly work within black cultural studies that examines the non-racial identities increasingly articulated

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by African Americans references artists and writers active within a decidedly upper-middle class cultural milieu. In contrast, the African-American New Thought ministers have followings that draw people from an array of class positions and social locations, hence offering them a space to engage with alternative visions of identity within a decidedly lay context, that is—outside of the postmodern black art world and academic discourse.

This study has clear implications for clinical social work practice which draws upon social identity development literature in an effort to conceptualize and support the personal development and well-being of black clients. Research such as this can help to de-essentialize black identity such that clinicians can better support their clients in pursuing their own self-defined goals. The next chapter provides an overview of both the methodology and the conceptualization of the phenomenon of contemporary African Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities that are not bound by the external demands inherent in racial identity. In particular, the next chapter introduces the two theoretical frameworks employed to analyze the ideas of African-American New Thought leaders and describes some of the fundamental questions that they raise. A discussion of methodological biases, strengths, and limitations are also presented. The third chapter describes writings containing the views of African-American New Thought ministers Michael Beckwith, Deborah L. Johnson, and Eloise Oliver, as well as the spiritual communities that they lead. The fourth chapter presents a detailed discussion of Bonilla-Silva's notion of color-blind racism and the ways that this concept may inform an understanding of the phenomenon under consideration. The chapter also situates Bonilla-Silva's notion of color-blind racism within broader trends in scholarship that address social oppression and racism. The fifth chapter presents a detailed discussion of the notion of the post-civil rights condition and related formulations developed within the field of black cultural studies to

consider how they might inform an understanding of the phenomenon under consideration. The sixth and final chapter presents an analysis of the phenomenon in light of the two theories. This analysis also revisits the strengths and weakness of the research methodology as well as implications for both social work research and practice.

CHAPTER II
Methodology and Conceptualization

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology that guided this study, including methodological biases, strengths, and limitations. This theoretical research seeks to explore the implications of contemporary African-Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities that are not bound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity, and examines the ideas of African-American spiritual figures within the New Thought movement whose ideas are one manifestation of this broader phenomenon within the African-American lay population. In particular, this research explores the views of popular African-American spiritual figures Michael Beckwith, Deborah L. Johnson, and Elouise Oliver. Further, this research considers how their perspectives may challenge existing black identity development frameworks used within the field of clinical social work, such as Bailey W. Jackson's (2012) Black Identity Development model.

This research employs two theoretical frameworks that may help to illuminate the reasons for and implications of African-American spiritual figures and their followers seeking liberation by cultivating individual identities that are not bound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity. The first of these theoretical frameworks is sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2006) notion of "color-blind racism" which addresses the manner in which post-racial, color-blind ideology and conceptions of identity have emerged in both white and non-white communities where they effectively perpetuate racist social structures. Of particular use in this research's final analysis is Bonilla-Silva's (2006) exploration of the manner in which seemingly benign, everyday rhetorical maneuvers that ostensibly signal progress, such as the statement "I don't see color," actually support, and effectively obscure, continuing social inequalities. Given that the New Thought spiritual figures under consideration in this research advocate for the cultivation of spiritual identities beyond social identity largely through the use of verbal affirmations of one's fundamentally spiritual identity; it is important to

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evaluate both the possible continuities and discontinuities between their practices and the sociopolitical concerns that Bonilla-Silva raises.

The second theoretical framework that may help to shed light on some of the reasons for and implications of African Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities unbound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity is the notion of the "post-civil rights condition" (Taylor, 2007, p. 626) and related formulations developed over the last two decades in the humanistic field of black cultural studies. Taken together, the figures active in this discourse posit that the political imperatives that previously determined black identity and life trajectories now exert a lesser degree of control, resulting in an array of lifestyles, forms of identity, forms of cultural production, and social visions within the black community that were not previously socially permissible. Of particular relevance to this research is the notion that under the post-civil rights condition, the black population has diverged and found itself perhaps more politically fragmented than it was in the past but with an expanded sense of what is possible for individual black people. This theoretical framework may help to illuminate why this form of spiritual, non-racial identity has emerged and what some of its broader social implications might be.

Used in tandem, these two theoretical frameworks may help to answer this interconnected pair of questions: How might the phenomenon of contemporary African Americans seeking to cultivate an individual identity beyond a black racial identity arise from, reflect, and advance racist social structures that may be further strengthened by the rejection of the continuing relevance of race and racism within people's individual lives? Simultaneously, how might this phenomenon reflect broader social trends within black America over recent decades that illustrate the resiliency and adaptive capacities of black people as well as their evolving relationship to the political? This research leverages the above theoretical frameworks to explore whether, taken together, they might shed more light on the meaning of the phenomenon under study.

The primary source of methodological bias that bears on this research is this investigator's personal perspectives which have guided both the selection of evaluative theories and the final analysis presented in the Discussion chapter. For example, this researcher's background in cultural sociology prompted the selection of evaluative theories drawn from sociology and cultural theory, whereas another researcher might employ theoretical frameworks from a clinical or even a religious studies perspective. One strength of this research is that it presents information concerning a population—The African-American New Thought community—about which there is limited scholarly writing and no scholarly writing within the field of social work. Limitations of this research include its purely theoretical nature and the lack of direct contact with members of the population under consideration. However, this theoretical research builds upon the empirical research of Martin (2005) which utilized participant-observation and interviews within one of the spiritual communities discussed.

An additional note about methodology that is important to include concerns unanticipated difficulties during this investigator's research process. Though this investigator had listened to previous sermons delivered by the three African-American New Thought ministers detailed several years ago where they spoke more explicitly about the problems inherent in allowing one's social identity to become primary, it was challenging to find such concrete statements in written materials or interviews featuring these three ministers. Perhaps the three minsters' lack of explicit discussion of race in publically available written materials and interviews reflects the "post-civil rights condition," (Taylor, 2007, p. 626) explored in detail in chapter five, in which black public figures may no longer be required to speak on behalf of black people or in response to racial issues to engage in public discourse. Another possible explanation for this is that they are reticent to make explicit statements that could be excessively polarizing or risk reifying narratives that seek to minimize the continuing relevance of racism. Though this investigator concluded from the aforementioned sermons that the ministers' spiritual visions entail at least some degree of supercession of social identity in favor of a spiritual

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identity beyond the seen world, it is not possible to make such a definitive claim in this research due to the lack of textual evidence. Despite this, it is the three ministers' turn to the spiritual domain, the interior, and to the unseen that, nevertheless, places their visions of identity in conflict with the exterior-oriented blackness that has been popularly constructed and privileged within canonical theoretical works concerning black identity. Regardless of the lack of explicit statements concerning the limitations of social identity in general and a black racial identity in particular, the ideas of these three ministers offer material that may help to expand the scope of existing black identity development models utilized within the field of social work.

It is also important to note that, as Thomas Kuhn (2012) established in his work in the philosophy of science, the phenomenon under consideration as it is framed here is particular to this present historical moment and is analyzed using contemporary evaluative theories of interest to the investigator.   Kuhn's (2012) contribution to the philosophy of science is helpful in the way that it critiqued the linearity with which scientific knowledge has been conceptualized by suggesting that scientific fields undergo paradigm shifts that may effectively negate or revise that which was previously thought to be implicit in a given process of scientific development. This notion is not only useful for framing the methodological limitations inherent in this study but also for illuminating the manner in which the phenomenon itself may signal a paradigm shift of its own—a departure from the notion that a specifically black racial identification must necessarily lie at the pinnacle of a black person's identity development.

CHAPTER III
Phenomenon

This chapter provides an overview of the spiritual teachings and organizations of African-American New Thought spiritual ministers Michael Beckwith, Deborah L. Johnson, and Eloise Oliver to help illustrate how these figures understand non-social spiritual identity in relation to the project of transformation, social and individual. The ideas and practices of these individuals is presented here as a manifestation of the greater phenomenon under consideration—the ways in which contemporary African Americans are seeking to cultivate individual identities unbound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity. The ministers detailed espouse principles consistent with Religious Science, a denomination of New Thought religion (Martin, 2005). Religious Science, also called "Science of Mind," is a religious and philosophical system that was developed by Ernest Holmes in 1927, building upon a "pantheistic system of universal and spiritual principles and the practical application of those principles to one's life" (Martin, 2005, p. 2). Theologian Darnise Martin (2005) summarizes the framework of Religious Science:

> "These teachings and practices affirm that a person's consciousness is the gateway through which all things come into being. Whatever a person is experiencing in the moment is reflective of his or her level of consciousness. Prosperity and well-being manifest themselves in the lives of only those who believe they are possible for them. Those who do not believe in the possibilities must turn to consciousness raising; all persons must get past the mental, emotional issues that are blocking them from experiencing positive results in their lives." (p. 9)

Further, Martin (2005) explains that Religious Science teaches "Spiritual Mind Treatment" which refers to "affirmative prayer" or making verbal affirmations, believing that demonstrating shifts in consciousness is the primary means through which internal individual and external social change occur (p. 28). She summarizes stating that "[t]he philosophical basis of these various teachings is a metaphysical idealism that affirms the nature of reality to be based upon thoughts or ideas" (p. 10). In her book *Beyond Christianity: African Americans in a New Thought Church*, Martin (2005) identifies a

handful of prominent African-American churches that advance a New Thought paradigm, nearly all of which are informed by the framework of Religious Science: The Universal Foundation for Better Living in Chicago, Hillside Chapel and Truth Center in Atlanta, and the Agape International Spiritual Center near Los Angeles. What follows is an overview of the work and ideas of three such figures, the first being the leader of the Agape International Spiritual Center.

Michael Beckwith is the Director and Founder of the Agape International Spiritual Center located in Culver City, California just outside of Los Angeles. He came to international prominence following his inclusion in the best-selling book and popular documentary, *The Secret,* concerning the power of positive thinking and what Beckwith terms "affirmative prayer" (Simon, 2009). Beckwith describes his congregation as a "trans-denominational" spiritual center rooted in what he calls the "New Thought-Ancient Wisdom" paradigm which integrates the principles of the New Thought movement and wisdom traditions from around the world to promote both individual and social transformation (Rankow, n.d., Prophetic New Thought section, para. 1). As of 2009, Beckwith's multiracial congregation with a strong black presence was estimated to have approximately 9,000 members though it initially started as a group of only 30 that gathered in Beckwith's living room (Finley and Alexander, 2009, p. 281; Grossman, 2001). It is also important to note that though this number reflects the number of individuals active at the spiritual center, Agape also broadcasts all of its worship services over the internet for people to access all over the world multiple times per week via live video stream (Beckwith, 2014). Given the greater Los Angeles location, congregants are said to include the likes of black celebrities including LeVar Burton, Vanessa Williams, and Stevie Wonder, as well as numerous celebrities from other racial backgrounds (Grossman, 2001).

Liza Rankow summarizes the New Thought spiritual framework from which Beckwith's teachings have developed as the position that "our essential nature and identity is not physical, but spiritual and eternal— a microcosm of the Divine macrocosm— with the ability to reveal all the

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qualities of God. The reason for incarnation is to provide opportunities for the soul's learning and

development" (Rankow, n.d., Expressions of the One section, para. 1). Further, Rankow suggests that

New Thought teaches that

> "[t]here is no separation from the cosmic wholeness that many call 'God,' other than an
> experience of belief in such separation. All realms and dimensions of human
> experience— physical/material, mental, emotional, etc— are so interwoven that no
> person or thing in the cosmos can be separated from the whole. The only way to
> experience such separation is to believe in separation." (n.d., Expressions of the One
> section, para. 2)

A final crucial component of this philosophy is that social events, or events unfolding within the outer

world arise first from "inner mentation" or thought, hence "[c]onditions on the global or social level,

then, cannot be definitively addressed without a shift in the underlying mental causation" (Rankow,

n.d., Individual and Social Transformation section, para. 2).

In his book *Spiritual Liberation* (2008), Beckwith summarizes his spiritual framework, which

incorporates wisdom traditions from around the world into the foundational principles of New

Thought:

> "My central message is...about aspiring toward spiritual liberation, which I define as
> becoming free from the narrow confines of fear, doubt, worry, and lack, and living
> instead from a conscious awareness of one's Authentic Self, one's true nature of
> wholeness…Growing into spiritual adulthood has to do with understanding that we are
> here to attune ourselves to the evolutionary impulse that governs the universe, which is
> infinite, conscious, and seeks to articulate itself by means of us." (p. 1-2)

Though his spiritual teachings cover an array of subjects beyond the scope of this research, of

particular relevance here are his ideas concerning the nature of identity. Here, he elaborates further

about the nature of the Authentic Self mentioned above. He writes the following in the form of an

affirmative prayer:

> "All the ways in which I was previously tied to my human identity that would have
> convinced me I am separate from the Whole are now dissolved. They were never the
> truth about who and what I am. I am beyond my personal history, beyond my ego,
> beyond the ego's opinions, concepts, and points of view. I no longer see myself only
> with the moral eye but with the inner eye of the Spirit. In its reflection I see my

inherent purity, my innately awakened state…I know I am an opening, an instrumentality through which the Eternal shines forth and expresses through. This is my true identity, and I wear it well." (p. 184)

In other words, Beckwith posits that one's essential identity must be perceived beyond the seen world and ultimately exists beyond the specificity of one's human experience in the social world. Further elaborating on his understanding of identity, Beckwith (2010) states:

"As we progress in self-transcendence, the sense of separation or involvement with the personal mind expands into an awareness of the unique emanation that each of us is an individualized expression of the One Mind that is everywhere in its fullness...How do we cultivate an extended awareness of Self? First by an identity shift which acknowledges our atonement with the One Mind. We then grow confidence in our capacity to become a fully enlightened being. As an enlightened being, we live from a state of cosmic consciousness, a conscious awareness of our oneness with all life." (para. 6-7)

Beckwith's (2008) assertion that cultivating one's true identity requires a kind of self-transcendence into the spiritual is a notion that contrasts with the notion of social identity inflected with intersectionality advanced by leading black identity development theorist Jackson (2012) as the highest expression of self-understanding.

Perhaps most poignantly, Beckwith (2008) summarizes his vision of identity: "You must invest the spiritual coin of unbending intent to do the inner work required to reacquaint yourself with your-Self. It's like contemplating the Buddhist koan, 'Show me the face you had before your parents were born'" (p. 178). This notion that one perceive and recover a 'face' or self-image prior to, and beyond, the visible social world to ground one's self-concept seems, at once, entirely at odds with a dominant vision of outwardly resistant black identity and, also, a kind of prayer that seeks to enact the seemingly impossible—disentangling one's self-concept from the psychic shackles of racism, including the imperatives to resist, represent, and identify. This notion of recovering one's true face prior to and beyond the bastardizing forces of racism emerges in stark contrast to the masked faces implied in Dunbar's (1902) poem, "We Wear the Mask," as well as in other forms of black cultural expression where the trope of the mask is deemed something problematic and yet often necessary under particular

social conditions. Beckwith's (2008) use of "the face," however, suggests an interest in perceiving that which lies behind and beyond the masks sculpted and installed under conditions of sociopolitical domination, suggesting that this may require seeing beyond apparent social circumstance with one's "inner eye" (p. 184) to enable alternate futures.

Mignon Moore's (2010) ethnographic research concerning black gay men and lesbians within New Thought communities helps to shed some light on the personal significance of these teachings to members of this community. Moore's (2010) overriding research goal was to "give voice to black lesbians and gay men in Los Angeles on gay rights issues and more generally to consider their experiences as openly gay people living, worshipping, and socializing in African-American communities" (p. 188). Moore (2010) discovered strong support among middle-class black lesbian and gay male members of Beckwith's congregation for this "denomination within New Thought religion that embodied an African-American worship environment while simultaneously modeling the tenets of a historically white New Age/New Thought religious practice" (p. 205). Moore (2010) writes of one black lesbian interview subject who stated that the congregation appealed to her "because of the empowerment she felt through the ministry" (p. 206). Finally, Moore (2010) discovered that his interviewees found Beckwith and "the [New Thought spiritual] practice as a whole" to accept their "full selves" and that the combination of familiar African-American cultural practices in services, the emphasis on self-determination present in sermons, the culturally diverse congregation, and "the feeling of full acceptance no matter what one looked like, how one dressed, or one's race/ethnicity" were what enabled them to feel at home in this faith community (p. 207). Though Moore's (2010) research goal seemed to emphasize the sexual dimensions of his subjects' experiences and concerns, the interviewees' responses seem to speak to some of the longstanding tensions unique to black cultural politics. The notion of wanting to enter a community where their "full selves" (p. 207) might receive recognition and embrace reflects not only the marginalization of non-normative sexualities and gender

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identities within the larger public sphere but also the narrow and deeply heteronormative ways that authentic black gender performance and sexuality have been constructed. Though there has been great critical exploration of this subject in both its historical and contemporary forms, black cultural theorist Hazel Carby's *Race Men (2000)* is among the texts that address the consequences of a singular vision of authentic black subjectivity, focusing on dominant constructions of black masculinity and the manner in which they have become central to blackness as a concept and related political projects. Further, Carby (2000) explores how this tunnel vision has effectively foreclosed the recognition of other potentially legitimate black social and political subjectivities, most notably those of black women, within her analysis. Therefore, though this portion of Moore's (2010) work may seem to suggest that it was the freedom from the demands inherent in living in a generally heteronormative society that was significant to the study participants, it seems that one might draw additional conclusions. Moore's (2010) study responses may also suggest that what was liberating about Beckwith's community for the respondents was its utilization of familiar black cultural aesthetics but in a way that does not demand that congregants conform to a heteronormative vision of authentic blackness that may be more explicitly invoked in many communities within black Christian tradition. In other words, it seems that, in addition to the implicit commentary on the heteronormativity and sexual violence endemic to the larger society, the ways that the external demands of black racial authenticity circumscribe sexual expression renders the respondents' statements meaningful.

Building upon the framework established by Beckwith is Deborah L. Johnson, also an ordained minister of Religious Science within the New Thought community, who identifies Beckwith as her mentor and operates a similar spiritual center in Soquel, California (Rankow, n.d., Toward the Prophetic, para. 7). Johnson's congregation, Inner Light Ministries, provides similar offerings to its members and also streams its weekly services over the internet (Johnson, 2014). In addition to being an ordained minister, Johnson also has years of experience working as a popular diversity trainer and

consultant in conflict resolution who approaches issues of social oppression in manner informed by a commitment to "spiritual oneness" (Rankow, n.d.). Though employing slightly different nomenclature than Beckwith, Johnson's congregation emphasizes oneness as a core principle and "strives to embody this ideal in every aspect of operations and community life" (Rankow, n.d., Toward the Prophetic section, para. 7). Despite some of the slight differences in teachings that are beyond the scope of this research, it is important to note that both Beckwith and Johnson came of age during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s in Los Angeles and were both profoundly impacted by Dr. Martin Luther King's vision of the Beloved Community (Rankow, n.d.). Though both of their spiritual teachings call for the adoption of a fundamentally spiritual identity whose origins lie beyond the social, both understand themselves as being connected to the unfolding project of spiritual and social liberation of which Dr. King was a significant part.

Moving north to the San Francisco Bay Area, Eloise Oliver is an African-American minister of Religious Science and current spiritual leader of the East Bay Church of Religious Science (EBCRS)— a predominantly African-American congregation located in the predominantly African-American community of Oakland, California (Martin, 2005). Founded in 1986, the church came under the direction of Oliver in 1991 and grew from 37 to its current membership, estimated at 1,200 members (Oliver, 2014). Theologian Darnise C. Martin completed an ethnography of this community and shared her findings in her book *Beyond Christianity: African Americans in a New Thought Church* (2005). Martin (2005) describes EBCRS as an "uplifting environment, accomplished gospel choir, and empowering sermons" which integrate elements from a more traditional African-American worship environment and historically white-dominated New Thought religious principles (p. 2). Martin (2005) argues that it is "the intersection of New Thought doctrine, characterized by personal empowerment and abundance teachings, and the culturally familiar liturgical style reminiscent of the music, preaching style, and congregational responses of Black Pentecostals and Black Spiritualists, that has led to the

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success of this church" (p. 263). Martin (2005) quotes congregants who state: "We have freedom of expression at EBCRS" and "as migrants or descendants of migrants, the members enjoy a sense of being able to create oneself outside of the social mores and expectations of more conservative regions of the U.S." (p. 61). Further, Martin (2005) explains that at EBCRS "the concepts of struggle, redemptive suffering, and financial lack have been reinterpreted" in a manner that departs from the ways that these ideas are presented within mainstream African-American Christian congregations (p. 140). Martin (2005) quotes Oliver who articulates her spiritual philosophy in alignment with Religious Science principles: "I can't solve the problem of world suffering, but I can teach you to raise your consciousness so that you do not suffer, and how you can hold a consciousness of wholeness for others. That's how we transform the world, by raising the consciousness of each person" (p. 83). The size and location of her community indicate that the principles of Religious Science, including the assertion of oneness and the primacy of spiritual identity, haven taken hold in this predominantly black community.

As was discussed in the introduction, black cultural discourse has privileged exteriority and devalued any turn toward the interior or the unseen dimensions of one's existence. Calling for a turn toward a spiritual domain only perceptible through the vision of the "inner eye" (Beckwith, 2008, p. 184) is, for anyone inhabiting a black body "overdetermined from without," (Fanon, 1967, p. 116) perhaps intrinsically subversive. Though it might seem that the teachings of the African-American New Thought ministers may simply constitute an attempt to articulate the ineffable interior experience of being human in a manner that is irrelevant to the specific concerns of black cultural politics, one might argue that is it precisely this interior agency that has been denied black subjects. As figures such as Quashie (2012) and Alexander (2004) have suggested, this denial of interiority is not only imposed by a white gaze but is also vehemently asserted by black people themselves, believing that they must assert themselves outwardly against racism—today in the form of an encroaching post-racial, color-blind ideology that may deny their lived experiences and the histories that they claim. This concept of

color-blind racism, as conceptualized by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2001), is addressed in the chapter that

follows.

CHAPTER IV
Theory One: Color-blind Racism

This chapter provides an overview of Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2001) framework of color-blind racism—a framework useful for critically exploring the phenomenon of contemporary African Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities unbound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity. The Discussion chapter employs Bonilla-Silva's theoretical framework to consider the relationship between the spiritual identities claimed by African Americans within the New Thought community and contemporary forms of racism. This chapter proceeds by first providing an overview of the historical transitions which have given rise to color-blind racism as theorized by Bonilla-Silva and then explores various salient components of his theoretical framework.

In their paper, "Laissez-Faire Racism: The Crystallization of a Kinder, Gentler, Antiblack Ideology," (1997) Lawrence Bobo, James R. Klugel, and Ryan A. Smith help to contextualize the development of contemporary racist forms by describing the racialized social system and social ideology that preceded them. In discussing the transition from the explicitly racist attitudes of the Jim Crow era to the more subtle racist attitudes that emerged in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, they write: "We believe that structural changes in the U.S. economy and polity that reduced the importance of the Jim Crow system of exploited black agricultural labor to the overall economy lies at the base of the positive change in racial attitudes. In short, the structural need for Jim Crow ideology disappeared" (p. 31). Further, Bobo et al. explain that slowly through the hard work of black activists and allies, "the political and ideological supports for Jim Crow institutions finally yielded" and that "[i]t is precisely the defeat of Jim Crow ideology and the political forms of its institutionalization…that are the principal accomplishments of the civil rights movement" (Bobo et al., 1997, p. 31). Bonilla-Silva (2001) explains that as Jim Crow racism and accompanying social practices began to fall away, new racial practices characterized by their vagueness, intentional avoidance of blunt racial language,

and codification in seemingly nonracial institutional practices would gradually replace Jim Crow racism as the chief mode of racial domination in the United States (p. 118).

Despite the popular assertion that racism has been overcome, Bonilla-Silva (2001) asserts that this is not so, arguing instead that the demise of the de jure racism of the Jim Crow era simply gave way to new modes of domination. In his book *White Supremacy and Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era*, Bonilla-Silva (2001) argues that the racial politics of the United States underwent a significant shift from the Jim Crow period to the post-Civil Rights era. Whereas white supremacy was previously maintained through explicit assertions of domination, he argues that white supremacy is now perpetuated through subtle and seemingly nonracial means. In his later work *Racism Without Racists*, he writes: "Much as Jim Crow racism served as the glue for defending a brutal and overt system of racial oppression in the pre-Civil Rights era, color-blind racism serves today as the ideological armor for a covert and institutionalized system in the post-Civil Rights era" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 3). Bonilla-Silva (2003) posits that in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, rather than the complete decline of racism, a "new, kinder and gentler white supremacy" emerged to give rise to and perpetuate contemporary inequality—what Bonilla-Silva terms the "New Racism" (p. 271). The central elements of the New Racism are: 1. "the increasingly covert nature of racial discourses and practices;" 2. "avoidance of racial terminology and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience 'reverse racism';" 3. "the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality;" 4. "the incorporation of 'safe minorities' (e.g. Clarence Thomas, Condoleeza Rice, and Colin Powell) to signify the nonracialism of the polity;" 5. "the rearticulation"--that is, covert continuation—of some practices that emerged during the Jim Crow era (p. 272). For Bonilla-Silva, this contemporary social order characterized by New Racism is critically supported and reproduced by color-blind racist ideology that, he argues, has permeated the social attitudes of most white Americans and, to a certain extent, the social attitudes of racially marginalized groups such as African Americans to deleterious

social effects (2003; 2006).

Bonilla-Silva (2003) explains that color-blind racism has four key features: 1. abstract liberalism, 2. naturalization, 3. cultural racism, and 4. minimization of racism (p. 194). By abstract liberalism, Bonilla-Silva (2003) refers to the manner in which ideas associated with political liberalism (such as equal opportunity) are deployed without regard for the underlying social context of racial domination. He cites the example of many contemporary U.S. citizens denouncing affirmative action policies on the grounds that they run counter to the notion of equality for all before the law. Bonilla-Silva's (2003) concept of naturalization is meant to capture the tendency to "normalize events or actions that could otherwise be interpreted as racially motivated" (p. 276). In his view, naturalization surfaces when people insist that an event or practice that has emerged from a confluence of power-laden social factors is simply "the way it is" and, therefore, beyond reproach or critical appraisal (p. 276). Bonilla-Silva's (2006) notion of cultural racism refers to the phenomenon wherein individuals reference purported characteristics of a particular racial group in an effort to explain that group's social plight. For example, the argument that the absence of black fathers and general familial dysfunction are the source of black poverty is among the popular narratives that fall into this category. Finally, Bonilla-Silva's (2006) notion of minimization of racism refers to the popular notion that racial oppression no longer shapes the lives of individuals from historically marginalized groups or that the oppression presently faced by these groups is too minimal to warrant attention or political intervention.

Bonilla-Silva (2001) summarizes the phenomenon of color-blind racism:

"In general, color-blind racism articulates elements from the free market ideology and culturally based arguments to justify the contemporary racial order. Although color blindness sounds progressive, its themes, style, and storylines are used to explain and justify racial inequality. By supporting equality, fairness, and meritocracy as abstract principles but denying the existence of systematic discrimination and disregarding the enormous and multifarious implications of the massive existing racial inequality…,whites can appear 'not racist.' " (p. 80)

Bonilla-Silva (2001) suggests, in other words, that the language of color-blind racism that has achieved

currency within contemporary U.S. society helps to sustain domination of racially marginalized groups but does so in a manner that appears consistent with the values of justice, equality, and fair treatment. One example that Bonilla-Silva (2001) presents is the widespread practice of critiquing political initiatives such as affirmative action and welfare programs on the grounds that they afford special, and therefore intrinsically prejudicial, treatment that thus violates the value of social equality central to this country's political rhetoric. This language, he argues, enables individuals to couch prejudicial beliefs about racially marginalized groups in nonracial terms as well as conflate race-consciousness with racial oppression. Further, Bonilla-Silva (2001) observes that "contemporary ideological constructions...tend to be subtle, couched in universalistic language, and protected by the mantle of racelessness" (p. 79). The conflation of race-consciousness with racial oppression is of particular relevance to the spiritual philosophy of the New Thought community within the New Age spiritual movement in light of the emphasis on moving beyond dualistic thinking and embracing a singular spiritual identity that is not differentiated along racial or other social lines. This subject is explored in greater depth in the Discussion chapter.

Bonilla-Silva's scholarly work concerning color-blind racism has focused on the manner in which this ideology arises in white individuals and ultimately perpetuates racial inequalities. His body of work also includes his landmark book *Racism Without Racists* (2006) which employs ethnographic data to explore the impact of color-blind ideology on the social attitudes of both white Americans and African Americans. He suggests that color-blind racist ideology had a relatively limited impact on his black subjects as evidenced by the lack of "racist terminology, racial projections, and diminutives" that surfaced during interviews with white subjects (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 164). Bonilla-Silva (2006) does conclude, however, that, as with the white study respondents, color-blind racism seems to have informed the "semantic moves and rhetorical incoherence" that surfaced in black respondents' discussions of contemporary racism (p. 164). While he found that most black subjects answered

questions "without filtering them through the rhetorical maze of color blindness," a few employed

language "similar to those of color blindness" usually in order to speak to "contradictions between the

way things ought to be and the way things are" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 165). Bonilla-Silva (2006)

claims that "blacks, for the most part, do not subscribe wholeheartedly to the frames of color blindness"

but argues that the frame of abstract liberalism, in particular, has shaped how blacks articulate their

perspectives on particular social issues, such as housing inequality and the notion of the "culture of

poverty" (p. 170-172). Exploring the implications of some black study participants subscribing to

elements of color-blind ideology, he writes:

> "This ideological infiltration of the frames of color blindness into blacks' political consciousness hinders the development of an all-out oppositional ideology or 'utopia' to fight contemporary white supremacy. Thus, because so many blacks are swayed by elements of color blindness, the struggle against color-blind racism will have to be waged not only against color-blind whites, who cannot see the centrality of race in America, but also against the many slightly color-blind blacks." (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 172)

Thus, Bonilla-Silva (2006) acknowledges the manner in which the ideological force of color-blind

racism has come to shape the social attitudes of black Americans to varying degrees, insisting that

black Americans are among those whose color-blind ideology must be challenged in the fight for racial

equity. This theorization of the nefarious social mechanisms through which black Americans' political

consciousness becomes shaped by color-blind rhetoric has significant implications for African-

Americans who espouse notions of identity that de-emphasize racial identifications and, instead,

emphasize an identity that transcends the social world, including racial identity, altogether.

It is unclear how Bonilla-Silva (2003) would place the African-American New Thought

ministers in his theoretical schema, but his sociological model seems to proceed from a privileging of

the exterior that is inherently suspicious of articulations of identity and social visions that do not

correspond directly to social conditions as they are popularly understood. To offer a preliminary

analysis that identifies salient elements of this theory with the phenomenon under study, Bonilla-Silva's

(2003) conceptualization of naturalization as a component of the New Racism may be applicable to the New Thought ministers' understanding of the forces that shape social and political conditions. Given their emphasis on the concept of "inner mentation" (Rankow, n.d., Individual and Social Transformation section, para. 2) and its purported impact on external social events, one might argue that there is a sense in which this naturalizes and reinterprets oppressive social dynamics as the inevitable result of people's thoughts and, therefore, social conditions that cannot be remedied in any collective social forum. This emphasis on inner mentation may also lend itself to another component of Bonilla-Silva's (2003) New Racism—the minimization of racism. Though Beckwith and Johnson align themselves with an iconic American civil rights figure, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., their belief in inner mentation might also lend itself to the idea that the concept of social oppression is only relevant and disruptive to the extent that one insists upon its relevance in the mind.

A detailed exploration of the implications of the framework of color-blind racism for the phenomenon of contemporary African Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities unbound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity is presented in the Discussion chapter. This chapter offers a re-examination of African-American New Thought ministers and their espousal of core identities that are primarily spiritual rather than social in nature. The chapter immediately following this one turns to a second theoretical framework—the discourse surrounding the "post-civil rights condition" (Taylor, 2007, p. 626) –that may help to provide an alternative explanation for the phenomenon under consideration.

CHAPTER V
Theory Two: Post-Civil Rights Condition

This chapter provides an overview of the notion of the "post-civil rights condition" and related formulations developed within the humanistic field of black cultural studies (Taylor, 2007, p. 626). This is a discourse that seeks to shed light on the reasons that contemporary black people might express and understand themselves in ways that depart from standard narratives concerning blackness as well as, in some cases, a black social identity itself. This framework will be deployed in the Discussion chapter to help make sense of the phenomenon of contemporary African Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities unbound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity.

In "Post-Black, Old Black", Paul Taylor (2007) describes and explores notions of "post-black identity," "post-civil rights politics," and the "post-soul condition" explored by figures including black art curator Thelma Golden, black philosopher Tommie Shelby, and black cultural critic Mark Anthony Neal (p. 626). This discourse was inaugurated by Thelma Golden (2001), Curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem—an international center for black cultural production and critical inquiry—when she suggested that there is a group of artists that has taken on a "post-black" approach to art-making and self-definition. By "post-black," Golden (2001) referred to a new approach to art-making where black artists' creative work was no longer constrained by the need to speak to issues of black suffering or advance a singular, putatively black social agenda, thus allowing them to create beyond the confines of blackness as a concept. Taylor (2007) suggests that the concepts of post-soul culture, post-civil rights condition, and post-black are effectively synonymous in that they seek to capture the same complex contemporary situation. Despite this, Taylor (2007) suggests that each term sheds light on different dimensions of this multifaceted and ongoing "reorganization of black life" unfolding over the last few decades (p. 625).

Taylor (2007) identifies three manifestations of this reorganization within the domains of

politics, culture, and visual art. First, he points to the political transformations that occurred at the end of the civil rights era which was "marked at least in part by the apparent successes of the mid-20th-century black freedom struggle" (p. 625). For example, the work of black philosopher Tommie Shelby (2005) has sought to address the challenge of theorizing what forms of black political solidarity might be possible under conditions of mounting socioeconomic differentiation and other social transformations within the African-American population. Second, Taylor (2007) points to the decline of what he terms "soul culture" in popular music and film and its displacement by an "urban-inflected, hyper-materialistic nihilism" (p. 625). In response to this phenomenon, cultural critics Nelson George (2005) and Mark Anthony Neal (2002) have written about the cultural figures and expressive practices that have come to define what they term the "post-soul aesthetic" in which blackness is presented, embodied, and leveraged differently. One example of this aesthetic transformation in cultural production is found in the blaxploitation films of the 1970s and the rise of gangster rap music where a focus on black respectability and upright political engagement were displaced by a more individualistic and consumption-oriented social vision. Third, Taylor (2007) turns to the art world where he notes that the gains of multiculturalism resulted in the burden of representation being lifted from the social expectations that previously shaped the artistic agendas of individual black artists. Black cultural critic Greg Tate (2001) suggests that black artists began to alter their approaches to art-making with a demonstrable measure of "inventiveness" and "assertiveness" not previously observable in the group (p. 50). Taylor (2007) characterizes this development as one marked by the "emergence of artists for whom black identity is something to be interrogated, scrutinized, and variously enacted, if enacted at all" (p. 625). In this statement, Taylor (2007) speaks to the declining significance of blackness as a concept that black artists must actively represent or address, regardless of whether their works are intended for the consumption of a primarily black audience or a multiracial one.

Consistent with the emphasis that some thinkers have placed on transformations within the

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realms of art and cultural production, Taylor (2007) suggests that these shifts reflect a "trans-institutional condition" that extends to other life domains (p. 628). He elaborates:

> "Post-blackness…is not something only artists can typically put to better use than the rest of us. We might say that to be post-black is to experience the contingency and fluidity of black identity, to have to wrestle with the question of how to orient one's self to the various options for black self-consciousness, and to do all of this while relating one's self to the similarly fluid meanings and practices of the wider society." (Taylor, 2007, p. 627)

Further, Taylor (2007) summarizes this discourse as it initially emerged, quoting scholar of black popular culture Mark Anthony Neal at the end of the passage:

> "For Golden's post-black artists, as for everyone else who has learned the lessons of the post-soul era, the traditional meanings of blackness, the meanings that took their most recent form in the soul-era politics of respectability and black power, are too confining. New meanings have emerged: new forms of black identity that are multiple, fluid, and profoundly contingent, along with newly sophisticated understandings of race and identity, marking what Neal describes as the shift 'from essential notions of blackness to metanarratives on blackness.'" (p. 626)

In other words, this post-black discourse suggests that there has been a shift away from not only a singular conception of black identity but also the simultaneous dissolution of a world in which the political projects and social visions attached to this identity remain central concerns for all black individuals. Taylor (2007) suggests that though social conditions have not changed enough to make the concept of blackness entirely irrelevant, there remains "considerable insecurity and uncertainty in the wake of the civil rights revolution (and the Reagan counter-revolution)" that leave traditional notions of black politics "unsettled" (p. 638). Further, he states that the increasing impact of the critique of biological racialism has "complicated traditional notions of identity" (Taylor, 2007, p. 638). In referencing biological racialism, Taylor (2007) refers to the critique of the historical notion that race is an objective biological fact and the manner in which this critique has supplanted and reconfigured longstanding understandings of racial identity. Without the ability to claim that one's racial identity can be traced directly to one's biology, the nature and contemporary utility of racial identification has been called into question.

Taylor (2007) suggests that out of this critique of biological racialism have grown numerous

distinct perspectives within black political thought concerning the status of racial identifications, these

three being most relevant: that "race-thinking is obsolete and indefensible, and should give way to

some variety of nonracial humanism, universalism, or cosmopolitanism;" that "race is a storehouse of

social meaning that we can appropriate and play with as we see fit;" and that "race-thinking remains a

useful tool for navigating and understanding the world that previous race-thinking has made" (p. 638).

Taylor (2007) suggests that "the fact that reasonable people can see race as an atavism, a plaything, or a

tool already itself suggests that race-thinking has entered a post-historical phase, a point at which the

future of the practice is not assured or clear" (Taylor, 2007, p. 638). In other words, though social

conditions have not changed enough to render black identity entirely irrelevant for most people, the fact

that there are various figures within this community who actively theorize about the need to move

beyond race-thinking suggests some fundamental change in the manner in which people collectively

experience blackness. Taylor (2007) summarizes the conundrum: "Many practitioners of critical race

theory have tried to develop theories of race with constitutive historical dimensions. But the sense that

the history of blackness or of raciality has made a decisive turn, enshrined in the determination to

identify as post-black, post-civil rights, or post-soul condition, suggests that something more is

available, and perhaps necessary" (p. 639). This "something more" (Taylor, 2007, p. 639) is, perhaps,

what Beckwith and his contemporaries, along with an evolving cadre of black artists and other cultural

figures, seem to be uncovering in their own ways. This notion that there might be something more,

beyond that which exists on the exterior is related to Beckwith's assertion that a spiritual identity

grounded in the interior and authorized by the spiritual is essential to liberation. It is not entirely clear

whether the African-American New Thought ministers understand race as an "atavism, a plaything, or a

tool," (Taylor, 2007, p. 638) or perhaps some combination thereof. It might seem that these figures

might fall into the first category, perhaps viewing racial identifications as something that may keep

modern individuals tethered to and operating within the social rules and assumptions of a bygone era, unable to cultivate an interior sense of who they are in the present. Due to their lack of explicit statements in writings or interviews about the status of race within their spiritual philosophies, it is not clear whether the ministers would claim this first position, one of the others, or some combination. In any case, it seems that an awareness of the continuing relevance of race and its uses as a conceptual tool would not necessarily foreclose their ability to assert the problematic historicity of racial identifications and the primacy of an interior sense of self. In fact, reading race as both an atavism and a conceptual tool, but not an organizing framework for one's essential identity, might even bolster their capacity to assert a vision of identity that counters the effects of racism given the manner in which racism seeps into the interior worlds of black people, as Alexander noted in *The Black Interior* (2004).

Having asserted the relevance of the post-black position, Taylor (2007) states: "Post-blackness is blackness emancipated from its historical burdens and empowered by self-knowledge—the knowledge that race-thinking has helped create the world with which critical race theory and liberatory notions of blackness have to contend" (p. 640). The concept of post-blackness does not, then, suggest that race has no bearing on the nature and development of contemporary society but, instead, suggests that the history that foregrounds one's racial background need not dictate one's self-expression. This is a concept, then, that can help to lend coherence to contemporary cultural practices in which black people suggest that a specifically black racial identity may or may not be central to their self-understanding and personal goals. Taylor (2007) illustrates the paradox "[t]o be black is to have one's identity in part constituted by one's response to the ambient pressures of the racial norms that circulate in the social world—whether one accepts the relevant norms or not" (p. 633). This question concerning the tension between exteriority and interiority echoes Quashie's (2012) and Alexander's (2004) concerns about the oft compromised sovereignty of the black interior. For the African-American New Thought figures for whom spiritual identity beyond the social is ultimately most salient, it seems that

this notion of choosing how one responds to the "ambient pressures" (Taylor, 2007, p. 633) that circulate within the racialized social world may help to illuminate some of the implications of their beliefs.

To map, preliminarily, some of the connections between the theoretical framework of the "post-soul condition" (Taylor, 2007, p. 626) and the phenomenon under study, the notion that the gains of multiculturalism have freed black public figures to speak on matters other than race seems salient here. This notion is relevant to the lack of direct reference to race writings and interviews by the three African-American New Thought ministers and reflects a new kind of black publicness that would have been unimaginable during an earlier era. Black public figures choosing not to speak directly about race, or on behalf of the race, but about non-racial content is, itself, indicative of a shift in the expectations that bear on black public figures, as Taylor (2007), Quashie (2012), and others have elaborated. The emphasis on a sense of identity that arises from an unseen spiritual world beyond the social might be interpreted as consistent with the "nonracial humanism, universalism, or cosmopolitanism" that Taylor (2007, p. 638) references in his discussion of various contemporary perspectives on race-thinking within black social discourse. Though this universalist perspective has received significant criticism in black social discourse from those who understand it as a reflection of post-racial denial of the continuing impact of history, the sheer existence of this perspective within the black populace would seem to suggest that, at the very least, the monolithic constructions of black identity and black politics that emerged during an earlier era may no longer hold for the collectivity. The following chapter leverages the post-civil rights theoretical framework in conjunction with Bonilla-Silva's (2001) color-blind racism framework to critically analyze the appeal of African-American New Thought figures' understandings of identity.

CHAPTER VI
Discussion

This chapter offers a critical discussion of the phenomenon of contemporary African Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities unbound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity, turning to the work and ideas of African-American minister within the New Thought religious movement as one manifestation of this phenomenon. The two theoretical frameworks elaborated during the previous chapters lend decidedly different resources to this undertaking. While Bonilla-Silva's (2001) framework of color-blind racism may help to map the continuities between the African-American New Thought figures' ideas about identity and contemporary forms of racism, the discourse surrounding the "post-civil rights condition," "post-soul aesthetic," and "post-blackness" (Taylor, 2007, p. 626) suggest that the alternative visions of identity presented by these figures may constitute adaptive maneuvers that reflect new ways of imagining one's racialized self within a changing community.

To summarize briefly, the theoretical framework of Bonilla-Silva (2006) employs the term "color-blind racism" to describe contemporary social and political rhetoric that de-emphasizes race-consciousness and the continuing relevance of racism while effectively advancing and maintaining contemporary racist social structures. This concept has many possible implications for the phenomenon under consideration and certainly for the African-American New Thought figures highlighted. Bonilla-Silva's (2006) ideas lend themselves to the interpretation that the non-racial vision of identity held by members of this African-American New Thought community may simply reflect the perniciousness of the ideology of the "New Racism," (p. 272) and that the manner in which it is recast as a technology of liberation only further demonstrates its complicity in maintaining an oppressive social order. Further, Bonilla-Silva (2003) asserts that one of the primary elements of the "New Racism" that color-blind

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racism helps to perpetuate is the "incorporation of 'safe minorities' to signify the non racialism of

the polity" (p. 272). This component of his theory of color-blind racism may have implications

for individuals such as Beckwith who has achieved great public visibility and who, if viewed

through Bonilla-Silva's (2003) framework, may help to confirm the validity of post-racial visions

in the eyes of the public. Given the crucial importance of claiming ones true, non-social identity

within his philosophy, there may be a way in which Beckwith's (2008) assertion of spiritual

identity contributes to broader social efforts to minimize the continuing relevance of race and

racism. Bonilla-Silva's (2006) attention to the continuing material inequities that plague African

Americans under the New Racism may also suggest that some black people lack access to

educational experiences and critical frameworks that might disrupt color-blind racist narratives

and provide different perspectives on U.S. racial history and the continuing relevance of both

race and racism.

The theoretical framework connected to the concept of the "post-civil rights era" and

other related terms, such as "post-black" and "post-soul," also have many possible implications

for the phenomenon of contemporary African Americans seeking to cultivate individual identities

unbound by the external demands inherent in a black racial identity (Taylor, 2007). One

interpretation that this framework supports is that the non-racial vision of identity advanced by

the African-American New Thought figures is simply one of a number of adaptive responses that

contemporary black people have developed to experience agency under changing social

conditions and within a racial community that tends increasingly toward social differentiation

rather than cohesion. Further, this critical framework suggests that the particular identities

crafted by the African-American New Thought figures are continuous with other cultural

developments, such as the movement beyond artistic agendas centered around representing

blackness or promoting notions of black respectability into an agenda of unbridled creation that may overtly challenge, affirm, or entirely ignore the injunction to represent the race in socially prescribed ways.

Deploying these two theoretical frameworks in tandem offers a few concrete implications and also raises numerous questions. To what extent the non-racial visions of identity elaborated by the African-American New Thought ministers reflect or advance racial oppression is a challenging question indeed. It would seem that asserting the expectation that all individuals with African heritage must organize their identities around blackness is counter-democratic and harkens to philosopher Tommie Shelby's (2005) exploration of the seemingly insurmountable challenge of reconciling the individual self with the collective to chart a contemporary vision of black self-determination and black solidarity. It seems, then, that perhaps what is operating in this phenomenon is not simply the nefarious impact of color-blind racism or the development of adaptive strategies for imagining self and community anew but both forces, co-arising and continually informing one another. As figures from both theoretical positions assert, social conditions have not shifted enough to render the concept of blackness or racial identity entirely irrelevant to black people as a collective (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Taylor, 2007) but the forms that that concept of blackness takes in the lives of black individuals appears to be under constant revision. It seems, then, that the theoretical models that seek to capture black identity, such as Jackson's (2012) Black Identity Development model, must remain open to further revision, too.

To return to the discussion of DuBois that introduced this research, the existential quandary that he articulated in his famous question "[h]ow does it feel to be a problem?" seems relevant for mapping the broader implications of this research (DuBois, 1903, p. 7). It seems that the ideas and work of the African-American New Thought ministers may constitute one

contemporary attempt to respond to that canonical question by negating the validity of the question itself. Framing the seemingly intractable problem of racial otherness as one that is fundamentally linguistic, reproduced or challenged in the realm of thought, and incapable of containing the deeper spiritual agencies that exist within individual black people suggests that, as co-creators of the present reality, black existence is not, in fact, a problem to be solved from the outside in but rather a journey to be lived from the inside out.

For Quashie (2012), the key is to move from an emphasis on DuBoisian "double consciousness"--perhaps a framework reflected in Jackson's (2012) Black Identity Development model—to a "consciousness of surrender" to one's unseen, interior domain in a manner that brings its resources to bear on the exterior, social world (Quashie, 2012, p. 41). Though this process of surrendering to one's spiritual essence may not occur entirely outside of the influence of the social world, part of this surrender seems to require a willingness to open to unprecedented ways of experiencing oneself within the social world as well as to broader social possibilities yet uncharted. New Thought doctrine seeks to help individuals begin to entertain the seemingly impossible—an interior sense of self unbound by racist dictates—both as they imagine themselves, and the world around them, anew. Though this phenomenon certainly seems to bear the mark of the post-civil rights era and its unique forms of social domination upon it, perhaps the acts of imagination present in this phenomenon are critically necessary for dreaming, and actualizing, a world unattenuated by the partial vision of the past and present. Beckwith's (2008) quotation of the Buddhist koan, "Show me the face you had before your parents were born," (p. 178) speaks to this most poignantly and offers one permission to begin imagining and, indeed, feeling the contours of such an unsullied and unmasked true face.

One might argue that the desire to cultivate a sense of inner sovereignty amid the external

demands that construct one's racial identity lies at the heart of any political project that seeks to reverse the effects of anti-black racism. Certainly, the desire to cultivate a collective identity that can help to reclaim a sense of 'I' and 'we' beyond the limited and limiting scope of the oppressor might be identified as central to all movements for liberation organized around the axis of racial identity. The issue that has animated this research, however, is the way that black people are, in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, now finding themselves constrained by singular notions of racial identity reinscribed by black people themselves to navigate a sociopolitical context that has undergone change. This, Quashie (2012) and other black cultural critics argue, has resulted in a rejection of interiority and the multiple senses of self and political visions available there.

> Asserting his disavowal of the mask, Fanon (1967) writes:
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> "I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny…I do not have the right to allow myself to be mired in what the past has determined...The body of history does not determine a single one of my actions. I am my own foundation. And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate the cycle of my freedom...I, as a man of color, to the extent that it becomes possible for me to exist absolutely, do not have the right to lock myself into a world of retroactive reparations." (p. 229-231)

In his critical exploration of historical and contemporary issues related to race-thinking, black social theorist Paul Gilroy (2000) states that Fanon offered an "imaginative supercession of history as the self-conscious initiation of a cycle of freedom for black populations still dwelling in the aftershock of slavery, their founding trauma" (p. 336). Gilroy (2000) elaborates further, stating that in Fanon's schema

> "claiming a more authentic Being than the racialized order of modernity had allowed necessitated accepting but also turning away from the past…According to Fanon, the capacity to address the future, both as politically abstract and as personally concrete, was a precondition for health and healing, for recovery from the alienating and corrupting antisociality of 'race.'" (p. 336)

Gilroy's (2000) own intellectual project is organized by this desire to "address" the future in this manner (p. 336). He describes his re-visioning of race as one that necessarily "invok[es] the unknowable future against the unforgiving present" and seeks to both critically appraise and disentangle concepts of 'antiracism' and 'race' "in the interest of a heterocultural, postanthropological, and cosmopolitan yet-to-come" (Gilroy, 2000, p. 334).

The implications of this research for social work practice and research are fairly concrete. Social work draws heavily from existing models of black identity development to aid clinicians in supporting black client populations. The popular Black Identity Development model developed by Jackson (2012) suggests that the highest stage of black identity development is one where the individual develops a sense of black identity that becomes increasingly informed by an awareness of intersectionality. This model does not reflect the notion—apparently held by some black people—that a non-racial, spiritual identity is ultimately paramount and supersedes racial identity in importance. For other black people living under the post-civil rights condition seeking to espouse a non-racial identity that is not specifically spiritual in nature, such as Golden's (2001) artists, their understandings of self also remain absent from Jackson's (2012) widely used identity development model. Perhaps Jackson (2012) would conceptualize the African-American New Thought figures and their followers as falling into (or having regressed to) an earlier stage of identity development marked by naïveté concerning racial history, contemporary racial politics, and the impact of racial ideology. However, given the involvement of figures such as Beckwith and Johnson in the civil rights movement and their explicit alignment with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's project of building the Beloved Community, it would seem unlikely that the past and present realities of racial violence have escaped their notice. What is clear, however, is that they, and many other contemporary black people, may be

choosing to understand themselves and their place in their communities in different ways than those assumed by theorists like Jackson (2012). Though Jackson (2012) might attribute naïveté to those figures, the existence of a "post-black" (Taylor, 2007, p. 626) discourse for two decades would seem to suggest the development of new understandings of identity that warrant closer attention and further theorization. Future research within the field of social work ought to help to bring clarity to this complicated social question such that black identity models can be reshaped to better reflect the lives of black clients and assist the clinicians who serve them.

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