

History, Consciousness, and Performance

The sacral edge of black cultural creativity, articulated by Black Theology, traceable in its origins in the New World back to slave innovations, cannot be adequately accounted for in merely discursive terms, but only by taking cognizance of a *difference of the body* in its negotiation of time and space in America. That body's disruptive difference from the hegemonic whiteness of Anglo-American Christianity can be evaluated theologically only in terms of a performative divinization: a *daemonized* Majesty, a syncopated Word, a "blues-bodied" Spirit. It institutes a "local knowledge" that is finally dramaturgically divined.

For whites, theological blackness became conceptually articulate¹ only with Cone and Albert Cleage and Jaquelyn Grant (and multiple others) in the latter part of the twentieth century. However, it has been practically clear for blacks from the beginning. It authorized a practice of black freedom as critical—as Nat Turner could testify—as anything envisioned by the Frankfort School today. Its text is the black body in motion, in community, often enough, incommunicado.² It is a body that has been "labored"—under all the terror and tension of W. E. B. Du Bois's double-consciousness—into both a tragedy of anguish and a triumph of overcoming that now stands on the horizon of America as a theological and political sign of the times. But such a recognition also points toward a necessary interrogation of the white body in its negotiation of time and space in history.

This latter task requires, as its first step, reconstruction of the genesis of modern racial supremacy as a *surrogate mode of soteriology* for the white Europeans who read phenotypic contrast and cultic difference

into theological significance in their conquest of Others of Color in the various colonial theaters of New World contact. The section that follows here proceeds through these interrelated concerns by first addressing the *history* of white theological supremacy and the incorrigible black resistance it provoked, then sitting at the feet of Du Bois for a story of the *consciousness* such resistance evoked, and finally probing “under the skin” of black culture for a sketch of the *performative* competence that encounter with white terror has enjoined for a community determined to survive the onslaught.