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This thesis invokes Black Jesus as an abstract figure in two seemingly disparate early twentieth century American novels and, in doing so, intervenes in ongoing debates about the ethical capacities of literature as means of grappling with difference. The Christ figure is a literary trope of waning importance in contemporary literature as well as literary criticism, while the figure's regular invocation in film produces tired and ineffectual interpretations. However, I contend that recasting the Christ figure as a Black Christ may recuperate its value. Black Jesus may serve as what David Palumbo-Liu calls a discursive delivery system, connecting disparate perspectives and experiences in a way that conventional (white) configurations of the Christ figure cannot. As a supremely significant symbol in America, Jesus acts as a basis of similarity between vastly different experiences and perspectives, but the dominant version of Jesus has been co-opted by white supremacy and capitalist systems, and is therefore unable to connect across difference. Conversely, Black Jesus, as an intensely empathetic reframing of Jesus, is able to make these connections. However, if the Christ figure is represented as a suffering Black body, it may be limited in its

potential to provoke meaningful responses, as Saidiya Hartman warns that these representations of Black bodies reinforce notions of Black inferiority. Accordingly, I show Black Jesus may be freed from this bind of realist representation through abstraction, an aesthetic choice in artistic production and interpretation which Phillip Brian Harper hails as a response to the onus of correct representations of African Americans. This thesis identifies abstract spaces in Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* as an avenue for Black Jesus to enter the text and counter the existential threats levelled against the novel's characters, and then invokes a configuration of Black Jesus in the abstract spaces of Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, where the figure addresses the spiritual crises facing those cast off by social structures. In each chapter, Black Jesus elucidates the individual novel's transcendental and material concerns, and, by invoking Black Jesus in seemingly disparate texts, the figure makes a significant connection across vast difference which suggests its revelatory capacity in literary criticism, contemporary theology, and cultural debate.

Abstract Aesthetics and Liberation Theology: Figurations and Invocations of Black Jesus in Early Twentieth Century American Literature

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Peter Dahl, Author

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Soli Deo Gloria

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Introduction

In American culture, Jesus Christ remains a powerful icon even as fewer people living in the U.S. identify as Christians. The ubiquity of this Nazarene carpenter has made his symbolic meaning familiar; Christians and non-Christians alike, in general, recognize him as a moral teacher and sacrificial redeemer. Perhaps due to the familiarity of such discourses, depictions of and references to Jesus are more likely to spawn kitsch and parody rather than careful or creative interpretation. Concomitantly, interpretations of Jesus' place in art and literature are sometimes based on assumptions rather than critical, original thought. Certainly the "Christ figure" has been an oft-used literary metaphor, as readers have noted the Christ-like attributes of a plethora of characters. Labelling characters as Christ figures has remained popular in film, in part because of a tendency among some religious viewers to force this reading upon certain characters (Kozlovic), and, as a result, "many scholars have called for a moratorium on the study of 'Christ figures' in film" (Walsh 79). Even if Hollywood continues to utilize the recognizable trope of Jesus and what he symbolizes, many scholars are dismayed by the unsophisticated readings of this character, as they tend to be "rather trite" (Walsh 82) and "theologically unsophisticated" (Deacy 1) and lead audiences to overlook "more enlightening allusions" (Walsh 80). Declaring a character to be a Christ figure is fairly straightforward, as some actions and traits (age of 33, sacrificial death, dying with arms outstretched, and many more) prompt the audience to interpret a character and

view a film a certain way. Hence the particular effect and value of identifying this figure remains debatable. As in today's cinema studies, literary scholarship of the 1960s indicates fatigue with such practices, and for many of the same reasons, as literary Christ figures are signaled much in the same way as cinematic ones.[1] Overt uses of Christ figures are less common in contemporary literary fiction of the kind usually studied in academia and, indeed, are studied less by literary critics. Critiques of this literary device today, even when reading literature from the American canon, remain largely limited to an all-too-familiar set of symbolic interpretations. Moreover, when, as scholars have opined, every character is a Christ, then no one is (Walsh 82). However, I contend that the figure of Jesus Christ still offers a great deal to literary criticism, and that expansive and innovative methods of envisioning Christ figures may enrich our reading of texts while catalyzing literature's great potential to make us more conscientious and ethical human beings.

While readings of the Christ figure are predictable and Jesus in the popular American imagination is somewhat monolithic, depictions and interpretations of the historical and religious figure are myriad. Jesus' ubiquity is reason enough to engage with the figure's meaning, but this work is all the more important at this historical juncture when the figure's place in the American zeitgeist is due for iconoclastic change. American culture and politics remain heavily influenced by Christianity, and the way Christians understand Jesus directly informs their political activity and cultural engagement (Heltzel xvii). Peter McLaren and Eric Weed contend that the election of Donald Trump has made clear that Christianity's disturbing links with

[1] For example, writing in 1967, Ignace Feuerlicht asserts, "The term 'Christ figure' or 'Christ image' has recently become quite common in literary criticism…. Often however, the term is used too loosely" (461).

white supremacy in America are still strong and that the dominant Christ figure remains the white Christ. The white Christ manifests in literal ways, such as famous paintings which depict Jesus as a white man (Weed 125), and conceptually as the Christ of "the diseased colonial imagination that secured the privilege of Whites" (McLaren 635). The white Christ is a pervasive and powerful figure in "a much larger theological history that would make it impossible for the Christian savior to be anything but white" (Weed 125). Consequently, as "the white Christ restores order to the United Sates as a white republic" (Weed 121), Christologies and theologies of liberation and resistance are certain to be generated, reformed, reinforced, and advanced in the public sphere. Liberation theology reclaims religious doctrine in an effort to refocus the implications of that doctrine into a praxis which serves marginalized people. Oftentimes these people have been marginalized in part by the oppressive acts or negligent inaction of religious hierarchy. Concerted efforts to reconcile religious tradition, spiritual teaching, historical legacies, and present social conditions result in liberation theologies, such as Feminist Theology and Black Theology, and these movements almost always have a particular concern for the poor. McLaren explains that liberation theology has been a politically active and subversive force in Central and South America for decades, but has been violently opposed by local governments, foreign agents (including from the U.S.), and previous papacies, purportedly on account of liberation theology's ties to communism. It is possible that the entrenchment of white supremacist Christianity revealed through Donald Trump will make social justice-oriented Christian ideologies more viable in the United States as a tool of resistance and liberation, as the persistence of liberation theology

elsewhere (and the papacy of Francis) has demonstrated its durability. While it may have previously been an untenable position in cultural discourse, Marxist theology may rise in force to oppose white supremacist Christianity.[2] While studying the white Jesus helps us to understand dominant white paradigms of Christianity, understanding theologies of liberation and resistance bring us to the figure of Black Jesus, a theological concept with great potential for literary interpretation.

Maintaining and recognizing difference in literary connections

The Christ figure is one of many ways to see the potential reading literature has to make people more empathetic and aware. Literature enables us to have a better understanding of others, but historical conditions, especially globalization, prompt us to reconsider literature's role in making connections between people. Today, technology has given some people the ability to access radical difference in mere moments, and this development in human relationships presents new questions and possibilities. David Palumbo-Liu reappraises common understandings of literature's empathetic potential in *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age*:

> …the aim of literature is precisely to deliver to us 'others' with lives unlike our own… However, this also presents a historical problem today. The notion that literature should mobilize (or even instantiate) empathy for others and enhance our ethical capabilities is rooted in the early modern period, wherein 'otherness,' while certainly increasingly present, was not nearly as immediately, insistently, and intensely pressing itself into the here and now of everyday social, cultural, and political life. (1-2)

[2] McLaren argues that Marxism and Christianity are not incompatible. In fact, McLaren asserts that, while Marx's attacks on organized religion are well-known, "Marx was certainly anti-clerical but both Marx and Engels…saw their work as a continuation of the authentic message of Jesus" (626).

Palumbo-Liu suggests that the omnipresence of difference and otherness for Americans in the Information Age could weaken literature's power to instill empathy. Additionally, he is wary of the amount of otherness accessible in this age, and he argues that certain ways of encountering radical difference could be counterproductive as it confounds our attempts at understanding and thwarts empathetic goals. He refers to Aristotle and Adam Smith to explain that, in addition to difference, literature must also present readers with an amount of similarity. For Palumbo-Liu, reading literature should become less about encountering otherness as embodied in the essence of literature, and more about accounting for what creates the difference in the first place. Palumbo-Liu writes: "I suggest that rather than focusing entirely on meaning-making, and whether we get it or not, we should think of how literature engenders a space for imagining our relation to others and thinking through why and how that creation exists, historically, politically, ideologically" (14). Too much difference can confound the self and thwart the empathetic experience, but maintaining similarity and difference allows reading literature to illuminate the space between subject and object which may otherwise have gone unnoticed: "Literature, and more specifically reading literature, helps us fess up to our standards of measurement, our yardsticks, because the text takes us outside our usual habitation of meaning, sense-making, self-assurance" (Palumbo-Liu 15). In this context, Jesus has the capacity to act as what Palumbo-Liu calls a discursive "delivery system" by providing readers (especially those in once or currently Christianized cultures) with a stable context *while presenting radical difference* which can, in turn, prompt an

empathetic consideration of what accounts for that difference – a difference which readers may have been oblivious to.

However, I do not invoke the radical difference of antithetical Christs – one white, one Black – for the purposes of setting up endpoints on a spectrum to connect via literary delivery systems. Even though Palumbo-Liu considers the downsides of encountering radical difference, his emphasis on establishing similarity in tandem with difference is not a move to centrism, pulling two disparate entities towards some sort of middle ground. The delivery system requires a common ground to operate, but not to the point of erasing difference:

> What we find is not a focus on 'fusion,' the evaporation of the walls that separate self and others, but rather a meditation on the mediation of that relationship. The meditation is imaginative, but not fantastic. It takes into consideration the real, material circumstances in which the event is embedded and reflects back on the relation the sufferer and the observer have to it. (Palumbo-Liu 20)

In keeping with Palumbo-Liu's theory of literature and literary ethics, I am not using the terminology of delivery systems in order to fuse Black Jesus and white Jesus for the sake of finding common ground. The figure of Jesus provides sameness while still affirming experiences and worldviews which are radically different, and it is these disparities which the delivery system helps us measure and account for. It is my contention that the entrenched, stagnant, and oppressive nature of white Jesus *cannot* make connections across vast difference, even within a Christianized context, but that the inherently empathetic and merciful nature of Black Jesus can. As Christianity remains a central subtext in American culture and politics, the Christ figure is

endowed with the power to do more than evoke the trite interpretations which plague film and literature studies; the Christ figure, *but only the Black Christ*[3] *figure*, has the potential to be a stable discursive delivery system if it is critically read into literature, a delivery system which measures difference, considers the conditions which create that difference, and moves individuals closer to an informed empathetic experience of otherness by making that difference visible.

The cultural and artistic legacy of Black Jesus

Black Jesus is an established figure in minoritarian culture, theology, and literature. In the literal sense, Jesus of Nazareth was a person of color, a fact of his life which has been whitewashed through centuries of Europeanization (and now Americanization) of the Christian tradition. This historical understanding of the figure is a crucial step in forming a Christology which is based in Jesus' servanthood, his ministry to the poor, his status as a marginal figure, his countercultural message and lifestyle, and the suffering which marked his sacrificial death. But Black Jesus refers to more than the historical figure; Black Jesus is an enduring theological configuration which continues to move and act in culture and in literature. The white Christ, though a historical fallacy, is also an enduring theological figure. The white Christ exalts Jesus' power, glory, and moral instruction, traits which lend themselves to those with power and privilege (Hopkins 146). Black Jesus is not a figure of religious right and imperial might; Black Jesus represents radical justice and mercy while standing in solidarity with the poor, downtrodden, oppressed, suffering people of the world (Williams 2). Black Jesus is "the Jesus who shares our suffering in those

[3] The difference between Black Christ and Black Jesus is mostly semantic, but, for this thesis, Black Christ will refer to a Christ figure that is also Black, and Black Jesus will refer to the theological concept.

vacuous in-between spaces of life" (Heltzel 11). The historical Jesus was not, of course, African American (a term conflated with "Black" in the American context), but the term Black Jesus proposes blackness as a ground for thinking across racialized experiences of oppression. So, in American culture, Black Jesus could be envisioned as Indigenous Jesus or Syrian refugee Jesus or Hispanic immigrant Jesus, but, historically, Black Jesus in the American context has most often been envisioned as African American Jesus. In short, the historical Jesus was Black, and the theological concept endures as the racially mutable Black Jesus.

As a social justice concept, Black Jesus has had moments of increased visibility and notoriety, but the concept as it is understood today largely took shape in early 20th Century African American art and culture. The figure became more visible in public discourse during the 1960s and 70s in Black liberation theology inspired by the Civil Rights and Black Power movements (Cone 101), part of a theological genealogy which can be traced to the Harlem Renaissance. One of the most crucial studies on Black Jesus comes from Reggie Williams' *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus: Harlem Renaissance Theology and an Ethic of Resistance*, in which Williams articulates how German pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was transformed by his time spent in Harlem studying at Union Theological Seminary and attending Abyssinian Baptist Church. According to Williams:

> The Christianity of the Harlem Renaissance was a theological manifestation, post-Civil War, pre-civil rights movement, that identified Jesus with the oppressed rather than with the oppressors, in a critical interrogation of the notions of God and humanity embedded within the modern imperialist union of race and religion. (2)

The Jesus of this theology was Black Jesus, and Bonhoeffer's experience in Harlem made Jesus' suffering central to his theology. Before his time in Harlem, Bonhoeffer upheld the superiority of the Third Reich; after Harlem, Bonhoeffer was moved by the plight of the Jewish people and became an anti-Hitler conspirator, a decision which would lead to his execution as a traitor in 1945. Black Jesus has been a socially-provocative theological concept for over one hundred years.

Black Jesus has also been used as a literary trope to artistically render the intersections of Christian faith and the suffering of Black people in America. Again, the Harlem Renaissance is a sort of wellspring in this discursive history, as Black Christ figures appear in works by individuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and Aaron Douglas. David Cone credits artists with using that figure to grapple with the horror of lynching, which was a common atrocity:

> Only artists and writers wrestled with the deep religious meaning of the 'strange fruit' that littered the American landscape…black writers, novelists, visual artists, and poets, like Countee Cullen of the Harlem Renaissance, with their feet grounded in the "tragic beauty" of the black experience, saw the liberating power of the 'Black Christ' for suffering black people. (95)

Appearances of the Black Christ figure were not always religiously didactic, but depicting the suffering of a Black Jesus still served to make an artistic statement about the condition of Black Americans by drawing connections between their circumstances and Jesus – a figure famous for suffering an unjust punishment.

The advantages of abstraction

Realist representations of the crucified Christ and Black victims of lynching carry powerful emotional and symbolic power. Cone draws the images together to make well-founded and poignant claims about racism in America. However, realist depictions of a Black Christ figure pose problems in spite of their potency. The first is their susceptibility to well-worn interpretations, a limitation which also plagues more conventional Christ figures. A realist depiction of Black Jesus will, like a white Christ figure in literature or film, be signaled by some combination of traits or actions on an extensive checklist, such as having twelve primary followers, performing miracles, and dying a sacrificial death with outstretched arms. Once identified as a Christ figure, the character is then supposed to stress some attribute of the character or theme in the story. These interpretations are too often tired and trite, and the result is that the analogous Christ figure offers little for an interpretation of the text or a critique of theology. Even if some of the realist depictions of Black Jesus in Harlem Renaissance works bring something new to this trope, they run the risk of facing the same bland interpretation, especially from white audiences. A similar limitation – especially for white audiences – is the potential for a realist representation of Black Jesus to reinforce the image of a Black person as being a subjugated, suffering person, given that most representations of Jesus will involve his crucifixion. Saidiya Hartman questions the benefits of these images in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, as she argues that images of Black suffering do not prompt useful feelings of empathy in the manner that might be intended:

> Rather than inciting indignation, too often they immune us to pain by virtue of their familiarity – the oft-repeated or restored character of these accounts and our distance from them are signaled by the theatrical language usually resorted to in describing these instances – and especially because they reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering. (3)

For many readers, a description or image of a Black Jesus or Black Christ figure facing some form of Jesus' horrific death might be emotionally affecting. But Hartman argues that representing yet another Black body in a position of suffering is too familiar to be useful, and actually serves to reinforce the notion that Black bodies are always subjugated. Realist representations of Black Jesus have their uses, but obvious and overt Black Christ figures may not be effective delivery systems, especially when encountered by white audiences. Palumbo-Liu's deliverance of difference would be undermined by the familiarity Hartman warns against. Realist representations of a suffering Christ figure in a Black body are restricted by preconceptions of white audiences, which would severely limit the amount of difference encountered by the audience and thwart the potential of the delivery system. If Black Jesus is to succeed in facilitating meaningful encounters with difference, the figure must be envisioned in a more innovative fashion.

Black Jesus can enrich interpretations of texts and make important connections via literature if the figure is abstract. Philip Bryan Harper has recently called for a move towards abstraction in understanding African American art (especially prose literature). He explains in *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* that realism seeks to cast African Americans in "positive terms," but the attempt to do so can always be decreed not

properly Black or limited by the parameters of realism defined by its audience (2). For all of realism's best intentions in depicting African Americans in positive or empathy-inducing ways, Harper claims realism permits a level of passivity from audiences. He borrows from Bertolt Brecht, who explains that abstraction's capability to create distance between the reader and the text allows the reader "to criticize constructively from a social point of view" (quoted in Harper 3) and prompts participation and engagement. Abstraction opens up space for new interpretations which are less predetermined by readers' expectations for realism. Harper's definition of the abstract aesthetic is broad, and he gives a range of examples, such as John Keane's disruption of narrative perspective through contrary pronouns in the novel *Annotations* (148-50) and the mobile syntax employed by Gertrude Stein in *Three Lives* (142-3). The flexible definition of abstraction clears space for imaginative readings. The delivery system, then, presents the audience with difference and the freedom of thought to explore that difference instead of relying on the preconceptions which are reified by realism. Through abstraction, Black Jesus becomes much more versatile in the ways the figure can inform a reading of the text and impart theological revelations, all while avoiding the pitfalls of realist representation which plague conventional Christ figures and images of suffering Black bodies.

Methods of abstract interpretation

How then, do we read an abstract Black Jesus in a text? In the chapters which follow, I will identify clear links between Harper's work and my own readings, but it is useful to set general parameters for attempting to envision abstract Black Jesus. In my own methodology, a first move is to examine a work for disruptions in its

aesthetics or narrative. Harper's critique repeatedly turns to disruption as the source of abstraction, and he contends that narrative disruption "is tantamount to the subversion of realism itself" and prompts a "divergence from the lived reality to which it evidently refers" (131). Harper focuses on sentence-level manipulation of language, but my method is more concerned with aesthetics. I focus on disruptive departures from realism, such as dream sequences, hallucinations, and exaggerated descriptions. Conspicuous intrusions, like the recurrence of a symbol, could also signal a departure from realist constructions, which aim at verisimilitude. While realist narrative constructs physical spaces which are recognizable as a representation of a real place, abstract disruptions challenge the rules, walls, and borders of that space and render an ephemeral outer space which is conducive to counter-narratives. Interrogating these disruptions can then give a view into space that has been cleared or possibilities that have been opened up, which would have been closed off in a strictly realist interpretation. The space opened by abstraction may reveal psychological or social traumas in the lives of the text's characters or shift attention to concerns of the text which may have been glossed over before. In some cases, the shape of these new spaces may seem tailored to what the theological concept of Black Jesus offers and represents – not the conventional signals of a Christ figure, but the characteristics of the Jesus who stands in solidarity with oppressed people. Reading Black Jesus as existing in that space helps bring the text's concerns into focus while informing a theological understanding of Black Jesus and the figure's cultural relevance. This process need not work in this sequence; it is possible to recognize Black Jesus in the text before working out exactly how the abstract space was opened.

The purpose of envisioning abstract Black Jesus

Professing Christians might be heard saying something akin to "They need Jesus," an expression which speaks to an abstract quality of Jesus that helps justify reading Black Jesus into literature. The idea that someone "needs Jesus" does not suggest that the historical figure must make an appearance, or even that an individual will have a lucid vision of a thirty-three-year-old Galilean Jew. Rather, the phrase speaks to the individual's need to be tended to or fulfilled by the essential nature of Jesus. Whether this refers to a mystical ministry or the heart of his ethical teachings is for a person to decide, but the point remains that Jesus has the potential to exist and to act wherever and whenever. Jesus continues to exist well beyond 33 A.D. as a discursive agent read into any situation where someone sees fit to put him. Likewise, Black Jesus may exist in any text which appears to "need" him. This need could be signaled by a theme or subtext related to suffering and oppression, especially when it exists on account of a character's identity within the system of society. Black Jesus is especially attuned to these sorts of injustices, for while these systems of oppression seem too big to overcome for any individual, Black Jesus is an extraordinary figure with unique ameliorative capabilities, and the damage done by oppressive systems as exhibited in the text often fits remarkably well with the figure's cares and concerns. The text can then form a delivery system with Black Jesus, but not white Jesus, as the oppressive systems at work are invested in the white supremacism of conventional configurations of Jesus. In turn, Black Jesus acts as a revision of the Jesus contributing to the underlying problem. Some texts will be more conducive to the figure than others, but versatility and freedom afforded by abstraction means that

Black Jesus works because we make the choice to imagine the figure there, not because the text demands it based on rigid criteria.

Configuring an abstract Black Jesus, reading that figure into literature, and then utilizing that reading as a discursive delivery system should not be misconstrued as some Christian sleight-of-hand. My readings spotlight the power of the Christ figure, but the connections being made through Christ do not need to be part of a didactic or evangelizing effort for the connections between Others to be a profoundly ethical act. Empathetic and service-oriented comportment drives the work of many scholars referenced here. While he interrogates assumptions about literature's capacity to instill empathy, Palumbo-Liu still recognizes that capacity and advocates for empathy's value "as a key element in fostering moral sentiment and social equilibrium, or indeed, in propagating human kind" (6). Harper champions abstract aesthetics for their ability to win readers to an "ethical perspective, not by inviting them to identify with recognizably black characters but by soliciting their investment in those identifiably black interests" (152). And, for McLaren, ethics is based in serving one another in a community: "This ethics of caring, reciprocity, and the 'golden rule' includes emancipatory religious practice, as in the civil rights movement. Here the struggle for justice includes the struggle against racism, sexism, patriarchy, and capitalism" (627). The hallmarks of Black Jesus and the work accomplished by the figure within literature are based in empathy and connecting with Others, and thus reading Black Jesus into literature is a creative move theologically and literarily as well as a labor of love and ethical scholarship.

Abstract Black Jesus in *Infants of the Spring* and *An American Tragedy*

This thesis offers my reading of abstract Black Jesus into literature. Such a project can enrich our understanding of a text in a way that illustrates a theological concept at work and builds connections between disparate experiences by way of the stable context of the figure Jesus. In grand terms, this project can reclaim the empathetic nature of Jesus as exhibited by Black Jesus from the clutches of white supremacy embodied by the Jesus of white nationalist theology. In the chapters that follow, I provide examples for how I envision this reading process in a critique of two novels: Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932) and Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* (1925). Of course, many different texts could be used for this study, but there are particular reasons that make these individual novels suitable, as well as reasons to pair them.

Infants of the Spring provides an example of abstract Black Jesus in Harlem Renaissance cultural production beyond explicitly religious texts. The roman à clef depicts the young artists of the day – the so-called "Niggerati" – while satirizing many of their social and artistic debates. Analyzing a Harlem Renaissance work allows my critique to address and refer to the rich cultural and spiritual context of the time and place, but the tropes that might restrict an explicitly spiritual text do not affect my interpretation because this novel is largely irreligious. Without being essentialist, it is fair to say that any Harlem Renaissance work will be influenced in some way by the Black church, or, at the very least, "liberation motifs in nonexplicit Christian texts have always been with African Americans" (Hopkins 45). A novel like *Infants of the Spring* brings the study into a critical time in the literary history of Black Jesus without dealing explicitly with religious themes, and it is one of Black

Jesus' advantages that the figure can freely operate outside of explicitly Christian themes and symbols. Aesthetically, *Infants of the Spring* is conducive to this reading for two reasons. The first is its use of satire and parody, which bases the work in reality while also signaling to the reader that it is, in fact, merely an imitation of reality. The second is the novel's occasional move into abstract descriptions, especially two key dream/hallucination sequences which disrupt an otherwise largely realist aesthetic. In the first chapter of this thesis, I explore the abstract spaces of *Infants of the Spring* and consider what underlying concerns they reveal. In some respects, the novel is a playful and rollicking satire, but by applying W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double-consciousness and current affect theories of mood, I focus my reading on the largely repressed feelings of pain and marginalization shaping the text. While these feelings do not dominate the narrative, passages in which the novel's aesthetic clearly departs from realism and becomes abstract bring these anxieties and longings into clear view while also ushering in the abstracted form of Black Jesus. The nature of these disrupted spaces evokes the pain of being trapped in a world bound by racist, heteronormative, capitalist paradigms, and the surrounding narrative calls attention to the inability of human saviors to conquer these oppressive conditions. However, the attributes of Black Jesus are tailored to these problems in remarkable fashion. While Thurman almost certainly would have rejected an explicitly Christian solution to the problems facing his characters, seeing these spiritual qualities in the novel serves to articulate its complexity by grounding it in the oppressive systems which threaten the characters' existence. In this light, the conflicts

and debates about art and proper social conduct can be seen for what they really are: discourse on if and how Black lives matter.

An American Tragedy is also a realist, secular work, but, as I demonstrate, it, too, is disrupted by abstract incursions. While dealing plainly with religious themes, the novel mostly denigrates Christianity and blames organized religion in part for the destruction of the novel's main character – a young man named Clyde Griffiths. In an unfolding of events which has been recognized as a quintessential example of Naturalism, the novel depicts the oppressive constructs of materialistic society. However, in rendering these constructs, the novel also creates an outer, abstract space. In the second chapter, I trace how the realist construction of Clyde's desired spaces acts to characterize the abstract spaces below where he wants to be. That is, the depiction of Clyde's attempts to move into the upper spaces of society and solidify his place in the comfortable world of material success also evokes the spaces which he is trying to avoid. While the novel is constructed in realist terms, the threat of these lower spaces materializes in abstract, hellish descriptions. Eventually, Clyde enters the lower space when his pursuit of success lands him in prison. I argue that the abstract atmosphere of the prison, as society's scorned receptacle for those who do not fit the system, is well-suited to an abstract Black Jesus, and that by reading Black Jesus into this space, we can make more sense of what happens to Clyde when he is there. As the antithesis of materialist American society, Black Jesus is able to be a salvific companion in an existential crisis like the one facing Clyde in his final days. Clyde remains distraught to the end, but not before sensing for the first time a

powerful figure who occupies spaces beneath capitalist constructs – spaces like death row.

The vast difference in these novels makes pairing them an effective move in demonstrating Black Jesus' capacity as a discursive delivery system. There are some similarities, as they are non-religious works about young people in America written just a few years apart, and both novels – despite being based in realism – have significant abstract elements. However, *Infants of the Spring* is a short novel of satire written by a young queer Black bohemian artist in Harlem, and *An American Tragedy* is a hulking Naturalist narrative written by a middle-aged white heterosexual elite member of the American literati born in the Midwest. The authors and their novels are very different, but my goal is to demonstrate how seeing Black Jesus at work in both of them can make a meaningful connection between disparate texts and experiences. Black Jesus is the Jesus who stands in solidarity with the oppressed, and this empathy and mercy extends across differences with the same figure still intact. Black Jesus spoke to Dietrich Bonhoeffer through the world of Harlem, and Black Jesus returned to Germany with the young pastor who would become a conspirator against Adolf Hitler on behalf of the Jewish people and others oppressed by the Third Reich. It is my contention that Black Jesus can make empathetic connections across great differences in America, drawing people away from the religion of white supremacy and towards the spirit of liberation in theologies which resist racist paradigms of nativism and imperialism. As I will demonstrate in my readings of the two novels, these connections – which deliver otherness in spite of difference in a way that is useful and actionable – can be made through literature. By envisioning an

abstracted Black Jesus, we can enrich our theology, enhance our understanding of American letters, and act upon our ethical obligations to better culture and society – all in the unexpectedly revolutionary act of reading literature.

Defending and Expressing Identity in the Surreal World of *Infants of the Spring*

The creation and control of restricting, often violent spaces, have been key to white supremacist power and the anti-black history of the United States. From piling captured Africans into the hold of a ship to mass imprisonment, anti-black ideology has perpetuated experiences and narratives of Black America which are some combination of false and dehumanizing. Black Americans have lived – to use W.E.B. Du Bois' terminology – "behind the veil" – a space that can be understood as both real and abstract. Yet, after forcing Black Americans into spaces of abstraction, dominant structures and discourse demand Black Americans respond by acquiescing to a clearly-defined paradigm, or a realist response. Existing in this abstract space with demands for strictly-defined realist response threatens to confound Black Americans, living, like the speaker in one of Amiri Baraka's poems, "inside someone / who hates me" (1-2). It has been an ongoing project for those in the African Diaspora to reject these confounding definitions, as Audre Lorde famously stated: "If I didn't define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people's fantasies for me and eaten alive." Rather than conform to realistic expectations and force their way back through the veil, Black Americans can reject the imperative of a realist response, remain within the anti-black conditions behind the veil, and reinterpret the abstraction in order to transport themselves to a reparative condition which does not reaffirm the conditions existing power structures have forced them into. To understand how this works in the arts and literature, we might turn to Harper's *Abstractionist Aesthetics*, which suggests that abstract narratives can fracture straightforward understandings of

a text and open up spaces which allow more nuanced considerations of the text's various concerns. One such reparative move within these abstracted spaces is to configure certain theological considerations and concepts, such as Black Jesus.

Wallace Thurman's *Infants of the Spring* (1932) is a narrative which can be read as abstract in order to see the novel's rendering of life behind the veil within the crucible of the Harlem Renaissance. Abstraction sets the novel on a slant which fractures its realistic elements and gives way to an abstracted vision of the era's art and culture. Although the novel utilizes mimesis to create parody and satire, its use of abstractionist aesthetics calls for a reading not just of the critiques leveled against various movements and ideas, but of the nature of the anxieties and desires of the younger Black artists it portrays. The ubiquitous debates about racial politics in the novel call attention to the nature of the debates themselves. As Harper explains, abstractionist artwork "emphasizes its own distance from reality by calling attention to its constructed or artificial character" (2) and "invites us to question the 'naturalness' not only of the aesthetic representation but also of the social facts to which it alludes" (3). Long debates about how individuals will save the Harlem Renaissance call attention to a "constructed or artificial character" and prompt the reader to consider whether or not the correct question is even being asked. Though grounded in reality, the novel's slant into abstraction helps create distance between the reader and the text. Rather than allowing a passive reading, as Harper argues realist literature does, abstractionist artwork prompts active participation. The distance achieved through abstraction in the novel invites the reader to engage with the text and the artistic and societal concerns which it evokes and to which it alludes,

rather than allowing the reader to merely observe the story as a compartmentalized critique of the big personalities and ideas relevant to the author's world.

The abstract spaces in this novel about Harlem Renaissance art and culture reveal anxieties stemming from tension between the characters' identity and the structure of the society in which they live. Raymond, Paul, and the other young artists living in "Niggerati Manor" are criticized, oppressed, and marginalized based on their race, sexuality, and bohemian lifestyle. This marginalized existence makes for a pervasive frustration and a longing for salvation as the artist's ability to merely exist in standard structures of space and time is destabilized and threatens the dissolution of Thurman's characters. The novel evokes the popular search for remarkable individuals capable of being a race savior, but also subverts the notion by revealing the inability any individual has to address these existential concerns. However, Black Jesus is unlike human saviors, and the figure's characteristics are well-suited to the anxieties present in the novel. In its most explicitly abstract moments, the novel clears a space that is perfect for configuring Black Jesus and beginning to consider the results of this intersection of sacred and secular.

Black Jesus is the individual who attends to the novel's concerns when configured within the space opened by the fractures of abstraction. Black Jesus as a theological concept emphasizes Jesus' solidarity with oppressed peoples. It brings the focus of Christianity back to the foot of the cross and conceals the liberating power of Jesus' ministry within suffering rather than within moral conduct and a prospering society. Black Jesus provides hope especially for people like the artists of Niggerati Manor who have found themselves despised and oppressed and unable to express

their full humanity. These attributes might seem to be part and parcel of any Christology, but Black Jesus is a marked, intentional departure from the Christ appropriated by dominant ideologies. Reggie Williams explains that Harlem Renaissance Christianity engendered a socially-conscious theology and Christology defined by "values that give priority to the intrinsically vulnerable, fluid, and relational character of the gospel over and against the analytical, evaluative, and domineering Christianity of empire and colony" (3). Black Jesus is the individual par excellence for Thurman's protagonist, Raymond, but not because he promises prosperity if the young artists would just clean up their act and fit in with respectable society. Rather, Black Jesus meets the artists where they are and attends to the unique concerns presented in the novel.

The novel's frustrated perspective is tinged with the effects of the veil, and the social commentary and critique of this satirical novel, through its abstraction, takes on the attributes of Du Bois' theory of double-consciousness. For, even as the free and indirect third person narrative (which usually takes the point of view of Raymond, Thurman's stand-in), produces scathing critique of the world around Raymond, it does so from behind Du Bois' veil. The narrative maintains "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" as he measures himself "by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 34). These two visions of the novel's recreation of Harlem manifest themselves through the aesthetics of abstract art (discussed at length below), aesthetics which Du Bois happens to use in his description of double-consciousness:

> Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. (Du Bois 33)

Du Bois' explanation of double-consciousness in *Souls of Black Folk* favors this abstract language which conveys what it feels like rather than attempting a conventional description. *Infants of the Spring* is grounded in double-consciousness. For instance, the story opens with Raymond using sarcasm to explain to Stephen, who has just arrived in Harlem, why he and his white associate, Samuel, disagree on the quality of a certain painting:

> "You see, Steve, Sam thinks it's all rather flamboyant and vulgar. He can't forget that he's a Nordic and that I'm a Negro, and according to all the sociology books, my taste is naturally crass and vulgar. I must not go in for loud colors. It's a confession of my inferior race heritage. Am I right, Sam?" (Thurman 3)

As opposed to the obtuse single-mindedness of Samuel, Raymond demonstrates "second-sight" which "lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (Du Bois 34), aware of his opinions and ambitions as well as his standing in his society. The narrator also uses this second sight in instances like the description of Bull, "the personification of what the newspaper headlines are pleased to call a burly Negro" (22), a reference to the term commonly used to describe Negro suspects in violent crimes, which amounts to using the terms of white society to describe a Black

character. Such instances of double-consciousness and second-sight place the novel within the abstract realm of the veil.

Double-consciousness as described by Du Bois works as what might now be termed in affect and critical race studies as a mood, which, in literature, may also signal abstraction. Life behind the veil places a pervasive filter over the subject's lived experience, holistically affecting their thoughts and feelings. These feelings, as they operate within double-consciousness and *Infants of the Spring*, might be understood using Sianne Ngai's "ugly feelings," as introduced in her 2005 book of the same name. Ngai's work draws attention not to the mainstays of pathos like joy or grief, but the "weaker and nastier" (7) emotions:

> For in keeping with the spirit of a book in which minor and generally unprestigious feelings are deliberately favored over grander passions like anger and fear…as well as over potentially ennobling or morally beatific states like sympathy, melancholia, and shame…the feelings I examine here are explicitly amoral and noncathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release. (6)

While "grander passions" have often been favored even as individual emotions go in and out of style, ugly feelings are, Ngai argues, perhaps especially suited to configuring emotions and aesthetics in a politically useful manner in the 21st Century:

> …the noncathartic feelings in this book could be said to give rise to a noncathartic aesthetic: art that produces and foregrounds a failure of emotional release (another form of suspended 'action') and does so as a kind of politics. Such a politics is of a Bartlebyan sort – very

> different, say, from the direct activism supposedly incited, according to what has now become American folklore, by Harriet Beecher Stowe's poetics of sympathy and the genre of sentimental literature as a whole. (9)

Ugly feelings shape the work's literary aesthetic and move readers as potently as grander feelings. The ugly feeling at work in *Infants of the Spring* is some combination of frustration and pessimism. Raymond demonstrates a bleak outlook on the future as well as a nagging frustration with his foundering artistic career, made clear in scenes like his attempt at a therapeutic walk. As he is walking through the park, not sure of where he is going, he thinks about how he wants to make real progress in his writing to create something memorable, but he struggles with nagging doubts about art's ability to deliver him: "[Raymond] was becoming less and less confident that he was possessed of the necessary genius. He did not doubt that he had a modicum of talent, but talent was not a sufficient spring board to guarantee his being catapulted into the literary halls of Valhalla" (90). For all the extreme highs and lows of Raymond's bohemian lifestyle, passages such as this are much more indicative of his feelings through the story.

The novel's undercurrent of ugly feelings is similar to the way Ngai defines and utilizes the concept of a mood. In describing how some ugly feelings operate more like a mood than an emotion, Ngai draws upon the work of Annette Baier: "Emotions…are about *something*, not everything, while moods, if they are about anything, seem to be about nearly everything" (quoted in Ngai, 179). Raymond says as much when Lucille asks him what has got him feeling down and he replies, "Nothing, I suppose, yet everything. I guess that damn house [referring to the Manor]

is getting on my nerves" (76). Emotions might come and go as *something* affects a character, but moods are pervasive. While an emotion might be clearly defined as a response to a particular thing, moods, like anything within abstractionist framework, blurs edges and tinges all aspects in some way. Christina Sharpe provides another basis for understanding the mood of the novel (and indeed of double-consciousness) in her description of the pervasive feelings involved in the Black experience post-slavery. Her term is "the weather," an all-encompassing set of circumstances in which "antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate. The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies" (106). In referencing Frantz Fanon, Sharpe claims that "it is not the specifics of any one event or set of events that are endlessly repeatable and repeated but the totality of the environments in which we struggle" (106). To be Black in America does not deny an individual the experience of a full range of feelings and emotions, but the totality of that lived experience will be set within the contours of an anti-Black climate. Raymond experiences highs and lows within the rollicking events of the novel, but his point of view remains tinged with pessimism and frustration, like the filter of the veil, that transparent boundary above which Du Bois lived "in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows" (Du Bois 33).

Mood is not limited to the thoughts and feelings of characters, as it affects the physical setting as well. Ngai explains how irritation, the mood which she utilizes in her reading of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, exists in a liminal space between the emotional and physical: "Irritation's marginal status thus seems related to the case with which it always threatens to slip out of the realm of emotional experience

altogether, into the realm of physical or epidermal sensations" (184). The physical setting of *Infants of the Spring* acts upon the characters, especially Raymond, in manifestations of the novel's mood. As noted above, Raymond cites the Manor as the locus for his irritation, and it is significant that this physical space where he lives and works gets on his nerves as it is the symbol which both delivers the Niggerati's ethos to the world while inviting the world's criticism and critique. But the novel's characterizing mood that shapes Raymond's existence affects the spaces outside the Manor as well. The narrator describes in detail the way the physical environment affects Raymond during and after he visits Pelham, Niggerati Manor's least talented artist who has been arrested on dubious charges of sexual assault. Raymond paces around the jail – "the Tombs" – four times with apprehension, as "the grim outlines of this city prison, etched in a shadowed canyon of skyscrapers, was repulsive to view and forbidding to enter" (125). Once inside and speaking with the distraught Pelham, Raymond becomes agitated as the narrator establishes how he is affected by the masses of people, storming out of the building in response to their encroachment on his person:

> He felt dizzy, faint. His ears hummed with disparate echoes, jumbled, monotonous and insistent. He perspired freely as if in a sweat box. The din enveloped him, became a crushing vise, enfeebling his mind and senses. And on the other side of the screen, Pelham continued his hysterical monologue. (127)

Raymond's reaction is to seek a new physical space, as he hurries out of the room and makes it back out onto the street despite the impediments of people, walls, and steel barriers. However, the street does not alleviate his discomfort for long, for even if

"the fresh air and the intermittent shafts of skyscraper-obstructed sunshine were tonic in their effect" (127), the street soon becomes "poor sanctuary" as Raymond is subject to a wave of stimuli:

> The rumble of an approaching train, the dimly lit subterranean interior, the clicking of the turnstiles and the bedlam of the crowd's cross currents were too akin to that form which he had just fled. He wanted to be in the open, to be away from constricting walls, jabbering people, and ear deafening noises. (127)

The crowded city streets only become worse for Raymond, and Thurman describes the physicality of the scene in lucid detail to demonstrate the physical/spatial affect of the scene:

> The sidewalks were crowded. Raymond walked in confused circles. He had lost all sense of direction. Excruciating pains racked his head. The conflicting currents of pedestrians pushed him first one way and then another, jostling him back and forth like an inanimate bean bag. Perspiration streamed down his face. Shrapnels of flame ricocheted from the pavement to sear his weakening body. He grew dizzy, distraught, and unexpectedly found himself leaning against a building. (127)

In vivid scenes like this, the lines between the physical world, Raymond's physical sensations, and his feelings are blurred, creating an all-encompassing affect which tinges the entire physical setting of the novel with a pessimistic mood. The narrator hints at this pessimistic pall, describing before the Donation Party that "The wolf must be driven from the door" (107). The tensions in *Infants of the Spring* are not merely the result of a series of conflicts, but are deeply existential quandaries given

the pervasive mood and negative affect. These abstract qualities suggest that driving the wolf from the door is more complicated than taking specific actions against specific problems; the conditions which threaten the existence of Raymond and company are more abstract, and, consequently, more difficult to escape. The novel's mood suggests a longing for a figure more transcendent than a brilliant artist or intellectual.

In addition to the abstract elements in form, narrative, and mood, the imagery and description – particularly in two key sequences – further develop the novel's abstraction and continue to direct our attention towards Black Jesus. Considering what the novel's abstract aesthetics "look" like focuses attention more closely on the nature of its concerns and anxieties. In America, abstract art was in vogue during the early modern period across artistic mediums, as Erika Doss explains:

> Analogies between abstract art and atonal music were especially resonant in the early modern period, as artists and musicians alike addressed the flux and uncertainty of the era on non-literal stylistic terms. Modern American literature (the poetry of T. S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Ezra Pound; the experimental novels of Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner) was similarly allied. (67)

Although Raymond is a prose writer, *Infants of the Spring* is just as much about the other arts, including poetry, visual arts, and music, as a reflection of the real life Niggerati[4]. Thurman would have been familiar with a range of abstract styles of art, creating a vast list of potential influences for the aesthetics of the novel. Some

[4] The younger generation of Harlem Renaissance artists ironically dubbed their coterie the "Niggerati." Prominent members included Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Aaron Douglas.

abstract art kept well clear of realistic representation, such as Arthur Dove's 1911 pastel *Nature Symbolized, No. 2*, one of the "first completely abstract American paintings," which expresses "Dove's perception of the inspirational power of nature, rather than simply its physicality" (Doss 65). Other styles were more realistic while leaning on abstraction, such as the work of Aaron Douglas, one of the young Negro artists in Thurman's coterie. Douglas "developed an abstract style derived from North African (Egyptian) sculptural reliefs, Art Deco styles, and Cubism" (Doss 92).

Based on the hallucination and dream sequences and the prominence given to the artist Paul, the abstract visual aesthetic in *Infants of the Spring* appears to be something akin to Surrealism. Surrealism, according to Erika Doss, "emphasized unlocking the unconscious mind to achieve self-realization" at the same time as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung were making similar attempts in the field of psychoanalysis (124). Post-impressionism, cubism, and other avant-garde forms hold influence as well, but my reading envisions the works of Surrealists like Salvador Dalí and René Magritte. Raymond's panic attack after visiting Pelham in jail evokes Surrealist imagery. As the crowded city streets turn Raymond's discomfort into dizzying, searing pain, he leans against a building for support:

> He felt an urge to bore into its surface and lose himself in its chilled immunity. Then the noises of the street began to recede into the distance. The people passing became inflated and floated haphazardly above the surface of the sidewalk. The buildings on the opposite side of the street leered from their multitudinous windows, and leaned precariously, a flashback to the Cabinet of Dr. Caligari.
>
> He pressed harder and harder against the surface of the building. After what seemed hours of effort, it gave way, and his body began to penetrate into its stone.

> He became chilled. The building across the way toppled crazily downward. Let them all. He was safe in his cranny. The protective stone had entombed him. He had achieved Nirvana, had finally found a sanctuary, finally found escape from the malevolent world which sought to destroy him. He sank back into his protective nook. The opening through which he had bored closed as if by magic and shut him out from insensate chaos. Oblivion resulted. His body slumped to the pavement, lay inert, lifeless, and was booted by the careless, rushing feet of passing pedestrians. (128)

Like many Surrealist works, this scene uses realistic, or at least recognizable, objects in a scene but configures them in a bizarre, unnatural, unrealistic manner. Raymond is able to turn the hard surface of the wall into something soft enough for him to fall into, like how Dalí made hard objects soft in paintings like his iconic *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). Though it would not be painted until 1953, the image of the floating pedestrians evokes Magritte's oil painting *Golconda*, perhaps the most famous instance of floating figures but hardly the only Surrealist work to utilize the image. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* referenced in this passage is a 1920 arthouse horror film which explores perceptions and distortions of reality and features "highly stagey," "off-kilter sets" (Sharrett 49) with harsh, jagged lines and leaning structures – like in Raymond's panic attack. Its mention here develops the bizarre, reality-bending aesthetic of Surrealism but, as a cinematic exemplar of Expressionism, it rounds out the imagery as an expression of Raymond's roiling emotions in addition to a manifestation of his harried psyche. A similar stylization of architecture is evoked again in the final lines of the novel as Raymond finds Paul's sketch of a "distorted, inky black skyscraper… on which were focused an array of blindingly white beams of light" (175), which is reminiscent of the shot in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* of the

murderer, Cesare, carrying Jane across a distorted, inky black skyline foregrounding a bright sky.

Paul's place in the novel reinforces the position of Surrealism as the dominant aesthetic. His drawings are the topic of discussion which opens the story, with Samuel claiming they "are nothing but highly colored phalli" (4), which, unless they are supposed to be totally pornographic, suggests the drawings are abstract and possibly surreal representations of the human form in a manner which might appear in a Dalí painting. The dream Paul describes having is, like Raymond's dream (discussed below), surreal. He describes an erotic encounter with "a presence" in "a poignant, excruciatingly beautiful dream" (24). The dream, according to Fiona I.B. Ngô, is an abstract vision of Paul's sexuality: "The presence that Paul senses in this wooded space is his own transgendered body. In an Edenic environment of unconstrained creativity, he has a dream of his transformation into a Japanese geisha" (105). Paul's artistic inclinations construct the scene of his suicide as well in a "gruesome yet fascinating spectacle" (Thurman 174). In an Orientalized, ritual suicide, Paul slashes his wrists and bleeds to death in the bathtub, where his friends find him crumpled up in a crimson mandarin robe, wearing a homemade batik scarf, surround by his portraits of spirits and the pages of his forthcoming novel. He was a "colorful, inanimate corpse in a crimson streaked tub" (174). The scene seems to recall Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793), but with an explosion of color, ornamentation, and artistic self-awareness that brings the scene well within the realm of the surreal.

The Surrealist aesthetic is produced by artistic ennui, but it also speaks to a more serious fear; Surrealism here is engendered by a fear of possessing an identity doomed for destruction. This fear of destruction was not uncommon at the time, as painters of the modernist period concerned themselves with the grim possibilities. Briony Fer argues that "annihilation and obliteration were the concern of modern painting" (79), and recalls Hal Foster's identification of "the insistent beat of the death drive within Surrealism" (63). She goes on to borrow from Georges Bataille, who wrote, commenting on Dalí: "Intellectual despair results in neither weakness nor dreams, but in violence" (88). The Surrealism of *Infants of the Spring*, like Dalí's various works of anxiety, alludes to serious underlying concerns. The novel evokes psychological fears like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* does as a horror film which "demonstrated that human psychology and the fragile social order are the most potent sources of terror rather than zombies, vampires, or lab experiments gone awry" (Sharrett 49). The Surrealist aesthetic highlights the despair which haunts the main characters and their search for artistic and social liberation. For Paul, the way out is through self-destruction, but finding Black Jesus' place in the spaces opened by way of abstraction will reveal alternatives to this violent end.

Jesus is an individual savior par excellence, and while the characters do not turn to him for salvation, *Infants of the Spring* is imbued with a sense that remarkable individuals – maybe even just one remarkable individual – can be a savior to suffering people. Raymond disregards the masses and is "only interested in individuals" (42), insisting that the Negro renaissance needs Pauls, not Pelhams (29). He "cannot bear to associate with the ordinary run of people" and has to surround

himself "with individuals, unusual individuals who for the most part are more than a trifle insane" (120). Accordingly, when Euphoria – more or less the matriarch of the Manor – recounts her story of how she became a radical seeking a great leader to uplift Negroes after she sees a lynching, Raymond is engrossed. Euphoria mentions John Brown as a source of inspiration and compares herself to Joan of Arc, describing how in her dreams she would see herself "on a white charger, leading a black army to victory against white people" (46). Raymond's belief in individuals carries through the novel, and in the long conversations on race Raymond explains in detail the individual's role in the changing world. He explains to Stephen that, even though the odds are "against every other man who would dare to think for himself" (134) that two types of Negroes "will ever escape from the shroud of color" and "break the chains": the Babbitt – the businessperson "who conforms unthinkingly to prevailing middle-class standards" (Meriam-Webster) – and the artist (135). Paul appeals to his individuality as merit when he writes what are supposedly letters to the Shah of Persia: "…I do not follow in the footsteps of the herd. For I, too, am an artist. A genius. I, too have visions…. I am that jewel. An artist. A genius. A citizen of the world" (138-9). He calls himself a genius on two other occasions, and he compares himself to Oscar Wilde, François Villon, and Fyodor Dostoievsky. However, even as Raymond insists on the supreme value of remarkable individuals, and as Paul presents himself as one of these valuable individuals, the novel calls into question the notion of a racial, cultural, or societal savior. For, in addition to the contrived discussions which destabilize the naturalness of the debate, the novel further troubles this notion as it ends up destroying its most impressive individual via Paul's suicide.

The story of the Harlem Renaissance, and indeed of Black American history, is often told as a story of remarkable individuals, some of whom Raymond specifically discusses. The novel does not affirm this narrative, and instead casts light on the shortcomings of flawed individuals. In this, Du Bois is again relevant and prescient, claiming, "Throughout history, the powers of single black men flash here and there like falling stars, and die sometimes before the world has rightly gauged their brightness," (34) a tragedy which he attributes not to weakness or inferiority, but to the nature of double-consciousness, or the "double-aimed struggle of the black artisan" (34). As the novel's concerns take shape, it becomes clear that remarkable individuals represent an answer to existential problems, but the characters can hardly conceive of an individual powerful enough to address the nature of their plight.

The novel's misgivings about the saving power of individuals works in conjunction with anxieties about the stock placed in the future as the location of progress and salvation. After Raymond's longtime friend Lucille comes to him for help in getting an abortion after she becomes pregnant with the boorish artist Bull's child she says to Raymond, "I never want to bring a child into this world. I agree with you, although I doubt your sincerity, that race suicide would be the quickest way to cure human beings of their ills. Why should we go on bringing others into this world?" (158). It is a morbid and sociopathic thought, but one which Raymond affirms:

> "It would be a grand day when the entire human race would be rendered sterile…a grand joke on the cantankerous old creator of our universe. I would chuckle with glee if one by one the inhabitants of this foolish old world would drop dead with no newly born replicas to don their shoes. That, in my opinion, is true anarchism." (158)

Raymond's remark is a compelling inversion of contemporary eugenicist thought, which Thurman decried not only in *Infants of the Spring* but in the screenplay he would write for an antieugenic film, *Tomorrow's Children*, in 1934. His remarks here enter into the project of defining and controlling the succession of the Black family. The legacy of chattel slavery has, according to Hortense Spillers, dehumanized and commodified the Black body (67) while destroying the capacity for African peoples in the Diaspora to conform to Western notions of patronymic succession and nuclear family structure (74). "Failure" to conform to these structures affirms anti-black narratives, and so the creation of future generations ends up working against the Black population. Raymond's inversion of eugenics rejects the notion of eliminating a population deemed inferior or undesirable.

This critique of family structure and succession also attacks the stronghold of eugenic practice: the future. Paired with Spillers' work, Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* raises the stakes as he suggests that prizing the future limits the potential of the present as the interests of the future erase any deviance that would threaten a social order based in heteronormative reproduction:

> For politics, however radical the means by which specific constituencies attempt to produce a more desirable social order, remains, at its core, conservative insofar as it works to affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of its inner Child. (2-3)

Edelman rejects the future as it, even in attempts to be new, better, or progressive, acts to reproduce the past. He suggests a mode of existence which (quoting from Guy

Hocquenghem), "is unaware of the passing of generations as stages on the road to better living. It knows nothing about 'sacrifice now for the sake of future generations' . . . [it] knows that civilisation alone is mortal" (30-1). Edelman's rejection of the future is based in the threat the Child poses to affirming the place of queer sexuality in society, a conflict which plays out in Paul's fate. Ngô describes Paul's suicide as "a grand performance of queer identity, where death is presented as another form of transcendence" (104). Paul is open about his queer sexuality, but in his death he rejects societal demands in extraordinary fashion as he denies whatever possibilities were held in the future of a system built to write people like him out of it.

Rejection of the future based in queer identity is part of Raymond's proposal of universal sterilization, but it also stems from marginalization based in other deviances from normativity. The artists of Niggerati Manor are judged and oppressed on account of the color of their skin, and some of them affirm the constructed superiority of whiteness by trying to pass for white or by affirming the value of sexual partners with lighter skin, which, looking to the future, would create light-skinned children more in accordance with white society's standards of breeding, worth, and beauty. The artists are also pressured to produce the right kind of art. In his artistic pursuits, Eustace refuses to sing Negro spirituals, a belief which Raymond thinks has Eustace unwittingly affirming "the theory of Nordic superiority" (65). The artists also face scrutiny for their bohemian lifestyle and decadence, which runs counter to the expectations respectable society has for producers of visual art, music, and literature. The standards, expectations, and normativity which the artists do not acquiesce to are future-oriented; it is in the interests of the future, of the Child, that

society seeks to regulate their behavior and castigate them for their deviance. But Raymond and Paul do not want to have to look to the future for solutions. They do not want to affirm the structures which put people of non-normative identities on the fringe. The future is nothing to them if the future demands a sacrifice in the present – especially as that future will be tailored to the needs of normativity. Raymond's vision of the destruction of humanity is based in an unmet demand: to be able – not tomorrow, but today – to live and express oneself as straight or queer, as any color, creating whatever art they see fit in their individual experience as a human being of worth.

The moment in which Raymond leans into the building represents his desire to escape the physical space that puts such strain on his identity and enter someplace that will allow him to (literally and figuratively) breathe easy. While the Manor engenders and represents many aspects of Raymond's identity as an avant-garde artist, this spot on the street impinges on his perception of reality as well. He has just walked out of the racialized space of a prison, where a member of his coterie is facing the dubious justice of the American court system. He has entered crowded city streets where his is, to many passers-by, just another Black man[5], and not recognizable as the distinguished writer he wishes to be. The buildings around him rise up as the rigid borders of his world as they signal the immutability of his time and place. All at once, the oppressive meaning of being an anonymous Black man in an early 20th Century American city closes in on him, and, as his panic attack ensues, his response is to leave the physical space behind, along with all that the space represents. He seeks to

[5] That is, if the passers-by are decent enough to label him as a Black man and not reduce him to a racial slur. It turns out that he is pulled back from his dream to reality by a doctor asking "How's the coon?" (129).

challenge the rules of physical space by boring into the wall and falling into someplace new.

While Paul destroys himself in rejection of the future, Raymond imagines a place where he can find comfort and renewal when he leans into the building, and this space he imagines – described in the novel's most explicit break from reality – is also evocative of the characteristics of Black Jesus. The dream Raymond has after his panic attack transports him to a place outside of time and space which is also an intersection of Black experience and Black Jesus. Like Paul's dream, Raymond's dream calls attention to itself through its elegant prose and vivid description of paradise. Raymond falls out of the panic-inducing, surreal environment of the city streets into a gentle place far-removed from the madding crowd:

> He was on an ocean. Calm billows cradled him, transferred him gently to the shore, venting plangent roars of self-approval. Mist kissed his lips and cooled his fervid head and cheeks. Spray enveloped his naked body. Fleecy phantoms in the sky protected his eyes from the blazing sun. Then there was a gradual cessation of movement and sound. The breakers had deposited him upon something soft and yielding to the weight of his body. The phantoms had dispersed and the sun's unretarded rays blinded him. The roar of the waves diminished in volume, became pianissimo, then faded into nothingness. There was complete silence. Consciousness returned. (128-129)

Raymond finds serenity on an ocean, and there is little doubt that it is the Atlantic Ocean. His experience of peace and paradise occurs as he is transported away from the city streets onto calm waves and deposited on a soft and welcoming shore. Raymond experiences this location free of the veil and the anti-black weather/mood

of frustration and pessimism which tinges his experience of Harlem. However, while the dream frees Raymond from the oppressive aspects of his life, it does not come at the cost of his identity, for the dream emerges from and reclaims the African American experience of the Middle Passage. This dream is Raymond's vision of freedom even as it evokes a location of enslavement.

The Middle Passage is unique in its capacity to signify rebirth and restoration for individuals marginalized within a society defined by rigid standards of normativity. Raymond's dream presents his destination (the shore) as well as the journey (the Atlantic Ocean) as locations of beauty and refuge. Returning to Africa as a sort of Promised Land is, of course, a common ideology of the Harlem Renaissance a la Marcus Garvey, and within *Infants of the Spring* there is a nod to the beauty of Africanness in the appearance of the "Nubian Queen" at the donation party (111). But the dream does not limit the worth of Africa and those in the Diaspora to the shores of the motherland; the location of the Middle Passage's cruel legacy also becomes a place of freedom for those impacted by the reach of slavery. In examining material representations of Transatlantic exchange, Marcus Wood finds that local Brazilian religions have reclaimed the Middle Passage as a sacred space:

> It is not as if the Bahia worshippers of Iamanjá do not fully take on board the horror of the middle passage, but what they and their religion goes beyond and, therefore implicitly refutes, is a Western construction of slavery which forever can see in the black slave and the slave ship only sites for sorrow, pity, guilt and negativity. It is horrible to die by drowning, as a slave, but it is paradoxically glorious to be united with forces of love and life – in the place where life began – the salt waters that Iamanjá simultaneously symbolizes, inhabits and embodies. (142)

In this tradition described by Wood, the waves of the Atlantic Ocean can be reimagined as sites of love and life, a version of this space which Raymond also envisions in his dream. Christina Sharpe makes a similar claim as she explains how life "in the wake" of slavery – and of the Middle Passage – and life within a weather of anti-blackness is not just faced with death and disaster, but with possibility. She refers to Edwidge Danticat to support her point:

> The past is full of examples when our foremothers and forefathers showed such deep trust in the sea that they would jump off slave ships and let the waves embrace them. They too believed that the sea was the beginning and the end of all things, the road to freedom and their entrance to Guinin. (quoted in Sharpe 105)

Even in the horror of a captured African throwing themselves to their death in the sea, the road to freedom and paradise opens. Pushed to the brink, Raymond falls through the wall of a building into the waves of the ocean, which carry him to welcoming shores. Neither the worship of Iamanjá or Raymond's vision prescribes a literal pilgrimage upon the Atlantic back to Africa; they evoke in abstract a space free of the Western construction of slavery and blackness.

The Middle Passage also moves Raymond's dream as a site of freedom outside of linear time, which frees him from the demands of the future while also inviting the presence of Black Jesus, as Black Jesus is also unbounded by time. The Transatlantic slave trade was an event that can be measured in linear units of time, but as a location and as a historical event its temporality is unstable and fluid. It is, as Sharpe says, "the past that is not past" (9). A reclaimed Middle Passage is not

constrained by the demands of the future which oppress Raymond. While remarkable individuals who might be race saviors face the limits of time, Black Jesus does not, and so this space is ideal for the figure to enter. Black Jesus exists outside of space and time and brings hope without insisting on looking towards the future, all requisite traits for an individual answer to the frustration and pessimism exuded by *Infants of the Spring*. Raymond's dream of the Middle Passage locates refuge and freedom in an unparticular time and place, and his musings on human extinction indicate his distaste for future-oriented solutions. While the historical Black Jesus – a Galilean Jew executed in 33 A.D. – is confined within linear time, the theological figure of Black Jesus and his ongoing ministry are not limited by chronology. Black Jesus suffers in solidarity with the oppressed throughout history. James Cone sees the body of Christ "recrucified" in every "black body hanging from a lynching tree" (xv) in American history. Cone also calls for envisioning the cross of the crucified Christ with "any reference to the ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings – those whom Ignacio Ellacuría, the Salvadoran martyr, called 'the crucified peoples of history'" (xiv). In this spirit, Raymond's body coming to rest on the comforting shore might be accompanied by Christ, cooling Raymond's "fervid head" (Thurman 128) and restoring his frustrated soul, existing in solidarity at that time and place instead of – like Euphoria's vision of a Black Joan of Arc – leading Raymond towards some future time and place where they would progress into victors. Although the historical Jesus had a birth date and grew into maturity before beginning his ministry, Black Jesus is not an archetypal promised child as he is already a fully realized savior. So,

unlike any extraordinary individual towards which Raymond might have looked, Black Jesus is not bound by the paradigm of the Child.[6]

Black Jesus' suitability for the novel's concerns as a non-white, present-oriented figure unbound by space and time is augmented by Jesus' queer identity. Black Jesus, and, I would argue, any framing of Jesus, is queer. The historical figure, according to Christian tradition, was unmarried and celibate. He carried out his ministry with a small group of (primarily) single men. I do not argue that Jesus was homosexual, but, if Jesus really was asexual in thought and action, then it is problematic to claim he was simply an abstinent or repressed heterosexual[7]. At the very least, his life did not conform to or perpetuate heteronormative standards, one of the many sets of social standards which his ministry rejected or critiqued. The ministry as continued in the figure of Black Jesus carries on these queer traits. We might clarify our understanding of Jesus' clash with time as well as the temporal struggles of the novel's characters by using Judith Halberstam's theory of "queer time," a term for what happens "once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance" (6). The historical

[6] Some theological clarification: My claim is that Black Jesus is especially suited to the concerns of *Infants of the Spring* because the figure invests the present with hope without having to make promises about the future or demands about acceptable behavior. This claim might seem to run totally counter to accepted Christologies, because part of the hope of the Gospel message is a promise of a better world after death. I do not mean to ignore this essential part of the doctrine of Christ even as I emphasize Christ's impact on the present. Similarly, as part of the processes of salvation, justification, and sanctification, Christian doctrine encourages and discourages certain behaviors. I do not mean to say Black Jesus has no notion of right and wrong behavior, but Jesus' presence is not blocked off on account of supposedly immoral, licentious, or sinful actions. Ignoring either of these aspects of Christology would call into question whether or not I am even using Jesus at all. Rather, I am reconsidering prioritization of Jesus' attributes; Black Jesus re-emphasizes the present and seeks to correct the disproportionate attention given by other Christologies to the future and to morality, as both of these emphases tend to reify dominant structures and marginalize certain individuals.

[7] Benjamin A. Kahan interrogates definitions of celibacy which cast it merely as abstinence from or repression of sexual desire, and suggests that while it may be a choice for some, celibacy can also exist as "a sexuality in its own right" (2).

and theological Jesus, as well as the marginalized artists in *Infants of the Spring*, resist the temporal "logic[s] of capital accumulation" (7). Black Jesus is capable of successfully resisting, but the conflict threatens to destroy people like Raymond. However, the queer time of Raymond's dream invites a reading of Black Jesus as a companion in a space outside of the temporal frames which threaten queer identity. Queer sexuality's marginalization in a heteronormative world is one of the novel's primary concerns, and Jesus' status as a queer figure makes Black Jesus that much more appropriate as the solution to those concerns.

Raymond's dreamscape of the reclaimed Middle Passage also appeals to an aesthetic sensibility which brings a life-giving solution to the novel's death march. As Raymond's naked, spray-enveloped body floats from the sea onto the shore, the scene evokes Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* (c. 1486). Venus in the Middle Passage is an illustration which Wood also utilizes as he prompts a thought exercise of "how the creation of a visual narrative focused on a black African Venus in Europe, and the African evolved Candomblé goddess Iamanjá, are used to mythologize the female slave body in ways not available to white abolition rhetorics" (123-4). Botticelli's painting is a twofold birth of beauty: as an artistic representation of the birth of the goddess of beauty, and as a milestone in the history of aesthetics. For a novel frustrated by dominant paradigms of human and artistic beauty, invoking this particular painting from within the space of the Middle Passage makes a claim for the aesthetic value of art produced by those people existing within the wake. Raymond's black body, drifting in on the same waves which once carried millions of enslaved African bodies, stands in for the European Venus emerging from the sea. However,

sensuous as these parallel scenes are, they are not sensual. Rather, they evoke a spiritual aesthetic. W.S. Heckscher claims that "Botticelli's Venus, the naked goddess of Love, far from being secular, alone erotic, is above all ethical and religious" (6). Botticelli's new-born Venus, the Anodyomene, evokes a spiritual figure which provides an individual which answers the novel's demand for liberation from society's white-privileged, heteronormative, bourgeois, future-oriented standards of existence and excellence.

The connection to Botticelli's Anodyomene further develops the appearance of Black Jesus, as Black Jesus and Venus both address the longing presented in Raymond's dream sequence. Heckscher explains that Botticelli picked up the tradition of combining pagan and Christian ideas and was the first artist to assimilate them in a masterpiece in the post-classical age (31). The scenes of the Birth of Venus and the Baptism of Christ hold plenty of similarities, such as "a divinity born, distinguished by *nuditas sacra*, flanked by attendant figures, emerging from a watery expanse" (Heckscher 6), and leaders of the 4th Century Christian church had apparently drawn the two figures together (29). Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* integrates Jesus into a secular artistic tradition, and, given the above discussion, Raymond's dreamscape evokes the Anadyomene from within a reimagined Middle Passage. Black Jesus and Venus are not future-oriented, or bound by the rules of time and place which limit human beings. In comparing the Birth of Venus and Baptism of Christ, Heckscher notes that "both divinities were redeemer-figures who appeared, though just engendered and born, in full panoply" (6). Jesus had dates of birth and

death, but the theological configuration – like Venus – is already fully-realized and ready to stand in solidarity with oppressed people at anytime and anywhere.

Reading the novel as an abstract work sets it on a slant and grants a view into a more complex, more distressed, and, I would argue, a more emotionally engaging reading than might be accessible by treating the novel as a rollicking satire and witty roman à clef. The novel may be these things too, but one of the useful traits of abstractionist aesthetics is opening this space for multiplicity and ambiguity. Envisioning Black Jesus as a response to the novel's anxieties and concerns – as a configuration which fills the spaces opened within a fractured reading – accomplishes two main objectives for the novel. The first is that it illuminates what is missing by setting Black Jesus in relief against the inadequate efforts proffered by the novel's characters. Black Jesus is an array of attributes unmatched by an individual like Euphoria's Black Joan of Arc, a societal solution like human extinction, or even an indomitable spirit of artistic individuality. Against Black Jesus, all other proffered solutions appear inadequate. This does not undermine the novel's aims; rather, this further underscores the novel's insistence that something critically wrong at the intersections of race, art, culture, and sexuality has set the lofty goals of the Harlem Renaissance on the brink, despite or because of the plethora of ideas of racial and societal betterment circulating at the time. The second is that applying an abstract reading of the inherently abstract figure of Black Jesus allows for a more diverse and more robust understanding of the relationship between Harlem Renaissance Christian theology and Harlem Renaissance art. Reggie Williams and David Cone discuss appearances of Black Jesus within the works of a few prominent artists, including

Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and W.E.B. Du Bois, but all of these representations of the Black Christ are explicit – explicit as Aaron Douglas' brilliant painting of a Black Christ in *The Crucifixion* (1927). Limiting configurations of Black Jesus to realistic, explicit works boxes the concept into the realm of the sacred while also recreating what Hartman describes as scenes of subjection. If the borders between sacred and secular are as mutable as some scholars suggest, then supposedly irreligious works like *Infants of the Spring* will be inadequately understood without attempting to read into how the Christian zeitgeist of Harlem shaped it.

Infants of the Spring is an abstract work, and, when read with this aesthetic, the resulting fractures open up a space of unattended anxieties and concerns which Black Jesus is well-suited to address. Black Jesus is an appropriate solution because this particular theological concept is inherently abstract. Anytime Jesus is invoked – even in the Bible – the appearance is representational and a sign of something else; realism can hardly be achieved in representing Jesus. Even in the four canonical Gospel accounts (let alone those deemed apocryphal), different (though not incompatible) pictures of Jesus are presented. This suggests any rendering of Jesus is some degree of abstract, which means appearances and invocations of the figure do not need to be limited to realistic representations. From the beginning, the legacy of Jesus has belonged to those who tell stories and those who interpret them. Therefore, Jesus, perhaps especially Black Jesus, exists precisely where we decide to put him. Where we decide to put him can be unexpected and surprising, but also so natural as to suggest the space called for his presence all along.

Using *Infants of the Spring* as a space to configure Black Jesus also acts to give life to a concept which is of vital importance to social justice and reparative, liberating theology in America. Black Jesus needs to move to live; just as the historical dark-skinned Jesus made his mark through a ministry of social activity, so too does Black Jesus persist as an effective theological concept through its continued work in the lives of marginalized people. The very existence of this socially-active theological configuration is based in praxis, not just doctrine. If Black Jesus is to be a stable system for the deliverance of others and an agent of social change, then we must make the effort to read Black Jesus into an array of texts which extends beyond conventionally religious and didactic works of art. Black Jesus is concerned with what happens within the walls of church buildings on Sunday mornings, but even more so with what happens day by day on the streets and in The Tombs and in Niggerati Manor with young, queer artists of color and any other individuals who might find Black Jesus standing in solidarity through their oppression.

Beneath Realism: Oppressive Social Structures and Abstract Space in *An American Tragedy*

Infants of the Spring illustrates the abstract, vacuous, in-between spaces in which Black Jesus operates. Black Jesus is the Christ hidden in suffering rather than revealed in conventional social mores and ethics as defined by the dominant culture. Given its abstract nature, encountering this figure of empathy and solidarity is less like meeting an individual on the street and more like stepping into an atmospheric condition. Antiblackness, to refer back to Christina Sharpe, "is pervasive *as* climate. The weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies" (106), and, appropriately, Black Jesus – as one way of confronting antiblackness – is similarly atmospheric, applicable at all times, producing new ecologies and transforming all aspects of an individual's experience. This all-encompassing, transformative attribute which is essential to any conventional Christology is what makes it such an apt intervention in the crisis of antiblackness as presented in literature.

Scholarship has most often applied the theory to Black experience, as Reggie Williams places the figure in and around the Harlem Renaissance and James Cone sees Christ crucified in the lynching tree, but these are just two prominent and important examples which vividly capture the concept. These essential studies allude to broader applications, as Williams' focus is the figure's impact on Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology and Cone aligns the lynching-tree-as-cross with a 2,000-year-old Christian history full of "ongoing suffering and oppression of human beings" (xiv), many of whom were not, by any definition, Black. It is one of my aims in this

thesis to demonstrate how Black Jesus may be applied to a broader set of experiences and identities, even if it may work particularly well with a Black experience. I began to demonstrate this in the previous chapter by showing how aspects of the Niggerati's marginalized existence in addition to their skin color evoke Black Jesus. In this chapter, I will explain how Black Jesus can be read into a novel of white American experience written by a white American author around the same time as *Infants of the Spring*. Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* challenges the worth of the artificial gods of materialistic society and fundamentalist religion, and when the novel follows the protagonist as he plummets from the ladder of success into the hellish depths below society, the answer to his existential crisis arrives – in my reading – in the form of the theological concept specially tailored to the experience of the oppressed, which is Black Jesus.

Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy* is a novel about space – the spaces in which the characters put themselves and the ones in which they find themselves, the spaces they aspire to reach and the ones which they fear ending up in. By emphasizing and underscoring particular spaces, Dreiser draws attention to the space beyond. A careful look into this space can reveal the presence of Black Jesus. In the case of *An American Tragedy*, the detailed illustration of American society (including religion and mores, class and economics, crime and punishment), alludes to the space below, the passage to a place where one might fall through the bounds of societal constructs. Clyde Griffiths spends his life aspiring to move into the literal spaces of society which will take him into the figurative spaces of elevated affluence, and all along the way he abhors the thought of remaining in lower spaces, whether that be a

literal place like the basement workshop in his uncle's factory, or the low social standing which missionary work would signal. Whereas, in *Infants of the Spring*, Raymond responds to the pressures of his physical space by seeking an abstract one, Clyde seeks to escape the lower-class spaces he occupies and turn his visions of grandeur into concrete reality. This will lead him to constantly assess his situation and standing based on the physical spaces he occupies and the ones toward which he strives, but his obsession with elevating his status repeatedly draws attention to undesirable spaces which threaten to encroach on his reality.

The spaces through which Clyde Griffiths moves in *An American Tragedy* are largely framed in terms of the competing pressures of his parents' religion and American capitalism. Despite their disparate expectations, John Dale draws the two together, suggesting that

> Clyde's complete ceding of his intellectual autonomy to colonizing visions characteristic of a class-conscious and materialist society has much about it that is religious since the latter certainly can involve a ceding of personal judgement to an all-powerful divine entity whose precepts are imposed on followers as articles of faith. (143)

Both forces demand specific actions and behaviors from Clyde while presenting elusive goals he will never reach. When Clyde finally does descend into the lowest and darkest place in his journey (and, indeed, in society), death row, he has a mystical experience which suggests an encounter with, if not a total embrace of, Black Jesus. Once he accepts his fate and is finally able to let go of his aspirations for a wealthy life, he begins to lend a willing ear to overtures to turn to God from his mother and

the Reverend Duncan McMillan, but his gradual submission to God is only possible because he has finally sunk into the depths of despair. Clyde is destroyed by a harsh world, and when he finds that his fate is inevitable, with no recourse to be found through the same systems which oppressed him, he is resigned to confront existential problems and entertain transcendent solutions. Prison is one of those despised places in American life where Black Jesus – "the Jesus who shares our suffering in those vacuous in-between spaces of life" (Heltzel 11) – is to be found. The Jesus he finds himself faced with in prison is Black Jesus, standing in solidarity with the most scorned members of society where the gods of moralism and materialism could no longer reach.

An abstract reading of *An American Tragedy* allows us to see Black Jesus at work in the text, even if the work's overall aesthetic is significantly less abstract than *Infants of the Spring*. The vast majority of the lengthy novel uses standard form and narration for a work of Naturalism (considered a subset of realism), setting a recognizable trajectory which the novel then breaks away from in key moments, such as Clyde's fervid ruminations on his desire to be rid of Roberta, the woman bearing his child. According to Harper, a work based in realism which follows narrative rules sets certain expectations for the reader, and when these expectations are subverted or the rules disrupted, the disruption addresses "not the actual *person*" reading the work, but, rather, a "mode of *consciousness*" assumed by the reader in engaging with that text (135). Furthermore, these disruptions evoke an ulterior agent (something operating outside of the face value of realistic portrayals) and the crafted nature of the work as the prose defamiliarizes the reader from the anticipated form (140). These

abstract qualities of *An American Tragedy* open up spaces which enrich a reading of the text by rounding out Dreiser's model of the tragic circumstances of American society and the pursuit of success.

Dreiser, as much as any major novelist of his time, utilized clear societal constructs to render his literary worlds while also hinting at the mutability of these structures. Thus, applying Black Jesus to *An American Tragedy* is not an unreasonable reading just on account of his status as a definitive American Naturalist. As a Naturalist, Dreiser was keen on using scientific explanations for human behavior (Newlin 108) and, disillusioned by his conservative Catholic upbringing, he disavowed conventional religion as containing answers, even excoriating the practice in his novels. This has led some to view his work as lacking in elevated reflections on human life, as Robert Shafer claims Dreiser "has nothing to tell us except that there is nothing to tell about life until it can be reduced even below the apparent level of animal existence, to the point where it becomes a meaningless chaos of blind energies" (quoted in Kazin 124), and Floyd Dell addressed him as a "dodo" passing off Darwinism as art (Banta 21). But many scholars, especially more recent ones, have found that Dreiser's deterministic and scientific approach is more open to mystical solutions than his reputation suggests. Steven Frye notes:

> Intellectually, Dreiser was perhaps more than any writer a man of his time, which is to say that he absorbed the dominant ideas current in his intellectual culture and struggled with question of God, meaning, purpose, and value. Rejecting the traditional division between mind and experience, his focus remained consistently on lived reality and the laws that govern the material world…. With regard to naturalism and religion, Dreiser remains secular in the broadest sense, often

> critical of religious orthodoxy. But considering his work in total, he functions outside any one particular intellectual system, religious, scientific, or philosophical. (168-9)

While Dreiser's Naturalism and irreligiosity are informed by thinkers like Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley, his embrace of Herbert Spencer, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Elias Hicks produced a spiritual component in his works. In Spencer, Dreiser found the belief that nature and physical matter manifested some form of higher power (Loving 88) and his preference for this view of evolution over Darwin preserve the profound human sympathy which endures in his works (Brennan 188). Emerson's philosophy was also of great importance to Dreiser, and this interest helped open up his mind to Elias Hicks and Quakerism:

> The religion that appeals to me as the most reasonable of all religions is that interpreted and taught by Elias Hicks, a Quaker. Hicks believed that every individual must have his own revelation of the truth. He believed that there was a divine instinct in every man, something that told him to sit still and listen. (quoted in Loving 392)

Dreiser espoused the dangers of organized religion, but he also believed certain spiritual worldviews could help individuals contend with the emptiness left by the material world's inability to address existential longings. David Brion Davis makes the connection between Dreiser and Pietism, which favors personal experience over human tradition and, by way of showing love and sympathy to the poor and supposedly immoral, proposes love and virtue as results of nature itself (26). Davis

rejects classifying Dreiser in the sort of cold and bleak terms which are often associated with Naturalism:

> It was not, after all, a pessimist or a seeker of the ugly and sordid who would write as Dreiser did in 1929 in 'What I Believe': 'I still rise to testify to the aesthetic perfection of this thing…. which we call Life…. It can does achieve an aesthetic whole – beauty no less – and via the same elements that are in lice and bedbugs as well as in the most distant suns or sidereal systems – in fire and flowers, in Shelley and Christ.' (236)

Dreiser was open to spiritual solutions and explanations – even those stemming from Christian belief. While acknowledging the Naturalist, deterministic aspects of *An American Tragedy*, as well as its condemnation of orthodox, conservative Christianity, it is not unreasonable to understand certain elements of the novel as evoking mystical experience, including one that is associated with Christ.

Reading Black Jesus into this space beyond the constructs of realism rounds out Dreiser's vision of society and adds a valuable complication to the novel's treatment of religion and spirituality. While the stage is set for this encounter throughout the novel, it finally and most clearly emerges in the final chapters, which present Clyde's existential crisis as he wrestles with his guilt and prepares himself for the day of his death. In this "psychic terror" prompted by thoughts of life after death, Clyde comes "at last to believe, not only must he have faith but that he had it – and peace – complete and secure" after constant overtures to turn to God from his mother and from the Reverend McMillan (Dreiser 849). He writes a letter exhorting young men to not repeat his mistakes, and in this final spiritual confession Clyde is "not a little impressed by the difference" (850) from when he first began to consider the

state of his soul when he came to the prison. He goes to the electric chair still weighted with doubts about what comes after death, but it is clear that Clyde has had some sort of mystical experience. Something in him has changed, or, at the absolute least, he has confronted questions and propositions which he had previously turned away from. Not all critics are convinced of this change – even those who note the conspicuous mystical elements in the prison scenes. Irene M.G. Gammel asserts that "only in the death house of Auburn does the naturalism in *An American Tragedy* merge with an overtly existential perspective" (137), but she maintains that "Clyde at no point reaches a moment of peace or inner awareness" (128). For Gammel, any change Clyde evinces is superficial and a product of the Reverend McMillan's dotage: "he 'spoonfeeds' Clyde with endless quotations of psalms and surrounds him with a superficial cloak of religion, which Clyde never really internalizes, yet alone understands" (129). She further supports her argument for a pessimistic reading by pointing out how the final chapter is a replication of the first, "which evokes an eternal circular movement and a denial of all progress" (134). However, this reading does not devote enough attention to the importance of the spaces in the novel or how Dreiser defines them. Clyde's change is accompanied by the soothing words of McMillan, but Clyde is in a place where orthodox, fundamentalist Christianity cannot reach him any more than the apparatuses of materialist America can. The prison becomes a structural embodiment of everything that is pushed below the American Dream and it is a depository of Otherness. All his life Clyde would have – like most people – seen death row as a Hell to avoid at all costs, but once he finally falls out of his ambiguous place on the fringe of social status and into his place as a scorned

outcast, he enters into the atmospheric condition of Black Jesus, which finally accounts for his change of heart.

Clyde is an ambiguous figure who has been denied the comforts of materialism and cast into a place below materialism's constructs, and the nature of this plight engenders his need for a metaphysical solution. The competing demands on Clyde consistently place him in a no-man's land, or lands. His inability to fit within recognizable structures steadily eliminates his options for fulfillment within materialist society. One of Clyde's first moves is to attempt to leave the space of fundamentalist Christianity in favor of the pursuit of success, rejecting the dogmatic prescriptions of religious life for materialist standards, measuring himself based on what he wears, what job he holds, where he lives, with whom he associates, and which woman he is able to sleep with. When he moves to Lycurgus, the world-shaping forces of fundamentalist Christianity and materialism become ultimately personified in his desire to distance himself from his father's work as a lowly missionary and instead associate himself with his wealthy, prestigious, powerful uncle. However, Clyde proves to not be quite so mobile. Gammel sees this immobility foreshadowed early in the novel, noting "the image of walls of stone to describe the cold and anonymous city atmosphere in which Clyde grows up" which also "foreshadow the insurmountable walls that Clyde encounters when he tries to break through the social barriers of his society" (29). According to Gammel, "Clyde's social ambitions place him in an ambiguous no-man's land. He becomes an outsider in a society that has clear socio-economic barriers" and he is "doomed to exist in the margins between the fixed social categories" (67-8). He is a handsome white man, but

not quite the masculine man of confidence prized by society. He is in a sexual relationship with a woman below his standing and on the verge of a relationship with a woman above him. He advances to a management position, but appears to lack a way forward into the capitalist class. In this world of walls and ceilings, Clyde seems to have one foot in the door of his dream mansion, but can never quite enter in. This ambiguity generates a certain economic anxiety and spiritual crisis. Catherine Junca explains that there exists in the suburban novel "a pervasive 'fear of falling" [which] is sometimes translated into actually falling within the class structure – the loss of a job or the relocation to a smaller, less expensive house" and that Dreiser is "one of only a few novelists to connect spiritual homelessness and material houselessness" (109). Clyde's ambiguity in a world of strict systems sets him up for an ultimate fall.

The descent into the prison and its importance is foreshadowed as the novel defines the spaces of realism in which it exists, and a privileging of up or above emerges, as opposed to down or the lower spaces. Clyde's first escape from the street level mission of his parents is to work as a bellboy in a luxurious hotel, which reaches up into the sky with levels of fancy rooms which Clyde is steadily able to explore as hotel life introduces him to so much of the world. The disparity between above and below becomes much more stark when Clyde moves to Lycurgus and begins work in his uncle's factory. His first job is in the shrinking room, the lowest rung on the factory ladder, which is literally in the basement levels of the building. Clyde is immediately disappointed by the prospects of working there:

> At first sight, and considering what his general dreams in connections with this industry were, Clyde was inclined to rebel. For the type of youth and man he saw

> here were in his estimation and at first glance rather below the type of individuals he hoped to find here – individuals neither so intelligent nor alert as those employed by the Union League and the Green-Davidson by a long distance. (190)

He understands the individuals through the space which they occupy, and he deems that space to be beneath where he belongs. He then comes to perceive Lycurgus in comparison to the space of the shrinking room: first, he finds himself awestruck by his uncle's home and the neighborhood it is in, and while he aspires to this life he also wonders if he could ever attain such status after being assigned to a place like the shrinking room. Then, when exploring the city's main roads, he finds a multiethnic crowd of people whom he thinks are "touched with a peculiar something – ignorance or thickness of mind or body, or with a certain lack of taste of alertness or daring, which seemed to mark them one and all as of the *basement world* which he had seen only this afternoon," (193, italics mine) again relating his perception of a place to the space which he has been assigned to occupy and attaching a negative connotation to that space. The stark contrast in Clyde's attitude between the physical space of his uncle's neighborhood and the city's main roads is a clear signal of changing atmospheres. His outlook on life takes a sudden turn based on his physical location, and these feelings drive his desire to steer clear of the atmosphere in which the common masses mill about. Clyde accepts the job in the shrinking room, but he worries about how long he will be left in the "dim world *below* the stairs" (222, italics mine). Haunted by thoughts of better times back in Kansas City, Clyde is desperate to move out of this subterranean space to somewhere more desirable: "And, of course, if he were retained in this wretched shrinking room, and given no show of any kind,

how could he expect to get anywhere or to be anybody?" (218). His cousin, Gilbert, thinks the lowly position fitting for Clyde, and his uncle, Samuel, thinks it a fine place to begin despite its lowliness: "Not exactly a pleasant place, but not such a bad place to begin, either – *at the bottom*" (221, italics mine). But Samuel changes his mind and decides his nephew deserves something better, and finds him a basic management job on the fifth floor of the factory. This space to which Clyde is promoted is described in stark contrast to the dark basement world of the shrinking room: "There were so very, very many women – hundreds of them – stretching far and away between white walls and white columns to the eastern end of the building. And tall windows that reached from floor to ceiling let in a veritable flood of light" (237). The imagery of a white and light open space works in accordance with the literal move upward, and Clyde is glad for the progress. As with the juxtaposition of the wealthy and common Lycurgus neighborhoods, the contrast between the shrinking room and the fifth floor evokes a sense of changing atmospheres. The move from the shrinking room to the fifth floor is a clear example of the novel's literal and figurative illustration of a world in which social climbing is the goal and the spaces below are to be abhorred, and the eventual disruption of this trope will steadily open the abstract spaces of the novel.

Even as space is defined in this organized and hierarchical manner befitting a Naturalist, it begins to disrupt the recognizable constructs of Clyde's narrative with abstract forces from beyond the fringes of his perception. In agonizing over the thought of murdering Roberta, Clyde is met with visions which reach up to grab him from somewhere below (in a mostly figurative sense). When first discovering the

possibility of mimicking the murder he reads about in the newspaper, "a strange and disturbing creepiness as to flesh and hair and finger-tips assailed him" (458). He puts the thought out of his mind, but as he falls asleep he falls into a terrifying dream:

> And then falling into a nervous, feverish doze soon thereafter, he found himself dreaming of a savage black dog that was trying to bite him. Having escaped from the fangs of the creature by waking in terror, he once more fell asleep. But now he was in some very strange and gloomy place, a wood or a cave or narrow canyon between deep hills, from which a path, fairly promising at first, seemed to lead. But soon the path, as he progressed along it, became narrower and narrower and darker, and finally disappeared entirely. And then, turning to see if he could not get back as he had come, there directly behind him were arrayed an entangled mass of snakes that at first looked more like a pile of brush. But above it waved the menacing heads of at least a score of reptiles, forked tongues and agate eyes. And in front now, as he turned swiftly, a horned and savage animal – huge, it was – its heavy tread crushing the brush – blocked the path in that direction. And then, horrified and crying out in hopeless desperation, once more he awoke – not to sleep again that night. (460)

The dream begins a motif of descent into Hell, and as the motif continues to develop, it draws attention to the spaces below while disrupting the realist narrative with these descriptions of immaterial, abstract, or liminal spaces and happenings. As Clyde continues to agonize over his decision, his mind is like "a small and routed army" and his grasp of reason, while "not actually toppling from its throne, still totters or is warped or shaken" (482), balancing on the precipice as dark thoughts grasp at him. His deliberations are described as a conversation within himself between Clyde and another voice, a voice which arrives "as though from the depths of *some lower or higher world never before guessed or plumbed by him*…a region otherwhere than in

life or death and peopled by creatures otherwise than himself" (482-3, italics mine). The voice is characterized as a jinni which suddenly appears, "the very substance of some leering and diabolic wish or wisdom concealed in his own nature, and that now abhorrent and yet compelling, leering and yet intriguing, friendly and yet cruel" (483). The voice continues to appear as a jinni, or "Efrit" (often associated with the underworld), and Clyde comes to recognize this spirit as being the voice "of his own darker self" (492). The Efrit disrupts and blurs the borders of Clyde's world, first transporting him into "a sealed and silent hall" (483) for their conversations, claiming that Clyde will not find a way out (485), and then later crossing into Clyde's sphere of existence and appearing in a drug store: "it seemed as though the Giant Efrit that had previously materialized in the silent halls of his brain, was once more here at his elbow" (491). Clyde's hellish visions act to disrupt the realist narrative, alluding to spaces below and foreshadowing Clyde's move into those spaces, which in turn draws attention to the possibilities existing within those spaces which had previously been closed off to the novel.

The pivotal moment in turning Clyde's narrative toward descent is, of course, Roberta's death, and Dreiser draws attention to the metaphysical force of this moment with a symbolic, gothic use of birds.[8] While Clyde tries to rise out of the lower spaces in life, his struggle against the forces from below is accompanied by the regular appearance of birds, the ultimate travelers of elevated spaces. Clyde is haunted and

[8] This use of the preternatural is not unlike what Irene M.G. Gammel notes concerning the description of Clyde's murderous deliberations: "It is interesting that the narrator uses an 'anti-naturalistic' vocabulary to deal with the problem of human evil. Thomas P. Riggio points out that in his description of Clyde's murder plans Dreiser is indebted to Edgar Allen Poe who 'employed oriental fables and gothic symbolism to analyze the mind of a murderer.' Like Poe's and Dostoevsky's murderers, Clyde also experiences the bizarre nightmare in which Clyde sees a black dog – evocative of his own evil desires." (108-9).

mocked by “the ouphe and barghest cry of the wier-wier” (477), which he first hears on a trip to the Adirondacks shortly after his first vision of Hell (“ouphe” and “barghest” both refer to faerie creatures). When he travels with Roberta to the lake where he plans to murder her, the narrator notes a flock of birds flying in the distance (496), the “lone and ghostly” sound of a woodpecker (509), the song of a field sparrow, the “metallic shriek” of a blue jay “far in the depths somewhere” (502), and again that blue jay shriek from “the depths of the woods” (509). The conspicuous attention given to birds recalls the motif of spaces below while also alluding to creatures which can rise and fall on a whim. But, throughout the trip to the lake, it is the wier-wier which continues to feature: “The weird, haunting cry of that unearthly bird again. So cold, so harsh! Here it was once more to startle him out of his soul flight into a realization of the real or unreal immediate problem with all of it torturesome angles that lay before him” (511). Clyde recognizes its cry from when he first began to formulate his murder plan, and it unnerves him as he is unsure if it is a “warning,” “protest,” or “condemnation” (511). When he finally sees the bird itself, “that wretched bird” lands upon a tree and then flies to another – both of them dead – as it makes its way farther inland (511). The birds, like the Efrit, disrupt the constructs of the realistic narrative, further preparing the novel to descend into the literal and figurative depths.

These motifs converge on the scene of Roberta’s death and mark Clyde’s ultimate avoidance of the spaces below. Before the decisive moments, the water appears dark, ominous, and bottomless (510). Whether or not Clyde meant to enact violence upon Roberta, she ends up in the water, struggling to stay afloat, and he has

the opportunity to save her. With the darkness below threatening to swallow them up and Roberta calling to him for help, the voice of the Efrit returns and persuades him to preserve his own life and do nothing, until, finally: "Behold. It is over. She is sinking now" (514). And then, once Roberta has drowned, the wier-wier returns one final time: "And then once more the voice of that weird, contemptuous, mocking, lonely bird…. The cry of that devilish bird upon that dead limb" (514-5). Roberta sinking into the dark water is a literal and figurative descent which Clyde is willing to let happen so as to avoid being dragged down with her – either into the lake itself or down the social ladder after he marries her. The good and just thing to do would have been to throw himself into the same place, going beneath the surface if need be to bring her back, but Clyde is determined to avoid that space at all costs. He cannot advance to his desired status unless she sinks without him. However, the voices of the Efrit and the wier-wier signal the irony in Clyde's decision: in letting Roberta sink below, Clyde sets himself on a path to a space lower than any he has feared going before.

Clyde allowing Robert to descend to her death is also significant in that it advances the novel's multivalent definition of the unwanted Other, drawing lines in classifications of race, gender, and sexuality which will return in Clyde's final descent. By letting Roberta sink, Clyde is finally attempting to rid himself of his ambiguous status. Roberta, though a kind young woman from a conservative Christian home, is bound to be a social outcast because she became pregnant after having premarital sex with Clyde. Doing so reduces her "to a state of nothingness in society" which places her, similar to Clyde, in "a state of dreadful ambiguity"

(Gammel 99). In a social system of hypocrisies and double standards, respectable and successful society condemned any sort of sexual deviance, so Clyde will be denied further pursuit of success if he is tainted by a connection to Roberta's illicit sex life (evidenced by her pregnancy). Additionally, Roberta's sexual scandal adds a racialized component to her ambiguous status. The ideal society in America was – obviously – envisioned as white, and in the early 20th Century sexual deviance was becoming associated with non-whiteness. Siobhan B. Somerville argues that bifurcations of race and sexuality at this time "were deeply intertwined" (3) and that "analogies between gender and race structured the logic of hierarchal rankings of bodies" (24). Wendy Martin explains this hierarchy which distanced respectable (white) women from sex: "In general, proper women were not perceived as having sexual needs or as being capable of experience erotic pleasure…. Moral qualities were attributed to degrees of skin pigmentation, and black women were condemned as lustful she-devils while white women were praised for ethereal purity" (quoted in Gair 171). Christopher Gair uses this excerpt from Martin to illustrate how Carrie Meeber, from Dreiser's earlier novel *Sister Carrie*, managed to become "whiter" (172), and, conversely, Roberta may be understand as becoming racialized as non-white. Though largely unacknowledged through most of *An American Tragedy*, race becomes a factor in delineating the classes Clyde is caught between as his decision to let Roberta drown becomes entangled with an affirmation of white, asexual definitions of conformity. Adherence to these definitions will continue to inform Clyde's perspective when he enters prison.

Clyde's dream of ascending into the higher spaces of social life dies as his conviction of murder consigns him to prison, but it is in this darkest depth where he begins his move towards his mystical experience. The physical space of the prison "death house" is poorly designed, being "one of the crass erections and maintenances of human insensitiveness and stupidity" (798), exacerbating the already-miserable conditions by denying the prisoners much privacy. Early in his stay, the depths continue to haunt Clyde, as he hears an awful yelling from a room below him (797). The Hell motif also continues: "And in the meantime Clyde was left to cogitate on and make the best of a world that at its best was a kind of inferno of mental ills – above which – as above Dante's might have been written – 'abandon hope – ye who enter here'" (807). In this explicit reference to Dante Alighieri's vision of Hell in *The Divine Comedy*, the narrative continues to evoke the importance of space, particularly the ordering of higher and lower spaces. David Spurr explains some of these concepts at work in literature:

> Dante's *Commedia* (1304–21) also shows its sources in the scholastic tradition through its systematic articulation of space according to an orderly exposition of divine justice…. it organizes the various forms of punishment corresponding to these sins into architecturally homologous spaces, and, by means of Dante's descent though these spaces, the passage from one point to the next figures as a series of stages in the poet's progressive understanding of divine judgment…. The downward movement of hell into ever narrower and darker space, where the sinner has ever less freedom of movement, is in direct opposition to the freedom of horizontal movement in a cathedral penetrated by light, and the thrust upward toward the source of that light. (16-7)

As a place for the punished and – in a sense – the damned, the prison-as-inferno is the ultimate low place, and in going there Clyde has completely fallen through the floor of his American Dream. Within this frightful new low, Clyde identifies one final space to avoid, a tangible physical space which also represents the final fall into darkness; the room at the end of the hall containing the electric chair becomes the literal and figurative place of fear: "That other room! It was in here somewhere too. This room was connected with it. He knew that. There was a door. It led to that chair. *That chair*" (797). In this new space, and with that final move down the hall and to his death looming, Clyde has sunk to the lowest depths of despair and is in need of rescue. While this need will eventually bring him into an encounter with Black Jesus, Clyde remains desperate to find a way out and back into the social spaces he aspires to, but his inability to do so will highlight the failures of that society while fully delineating the nature of the space he has come to occupy which is denied access to the supposed comforts of materialism.

The society which Clyde sought to make himself a distinguished member of is decidedly against him, forcing him into the space he has been trying to avoid. The cultures and systems which he had meant to become a worldly master of reveal themselves to be designed to oppress people like him. Those who have previously helped him, including his uncle, regret it (784), and his appeal to a higher court is denied despite the controvertible evidence presented in the trial. Many critics have commented on Clyde's controversial conviction and sentencing. Donald Pizer notes that the third book of *An American Tragedy* devotes a great deal of attention to "dramatizing the failure of the American legal system to protect the due process

rights of citizens charged with serious crimes," and he contends that the unjust practices and inadequacies in electing judicial officials and "the adversarial nature of trials" is more clearly depicted in *An American Tragedy* than anywhere in American fiction (441). Sally Day Trigg underscores the fact that Clyde's demise is not due to any individual, but rather "the system itself, quite literally the actual structures and facilities processing those who are to be executed" (quoted in Barton 239). The structure of American society which frustrated so many of his attempts to achieve success continues to thwart his future plans when he is in his darkest place. Tragically for Clyde, the positions in society he coveted were set with an atmosphere steeped in an oppressive system of hierarchy which sustains itself by subjugating people like him. Similarly, religion as a social institution also fails him in his hour of need. It was, in fact, the biases of a jury panel composed of citizens from a town marked by fundamentalist Christian religion which was largely responsible for Clyde's guilty conviction, but Mrs. Griffiths decides to try to use Christian mercy and understanding to rally support to give Clyde a new trial: "Might it not be possible, with such a temperament and such faith as this, to appeal to the very element that had hitherto most condemned Clyde and made his conviction a certainty, for funds wherewith to carry this case to the court of appeals?" (790-1). However, she finds little sympathy, and she laments that Christians are not being "as Christian as they should be" (804), and her own traditional Protestant views compel her to avoid seeking help from Catholics (805). The structures which formed the scaffolding for Clyde's existence act to keep him within the prison, and, with the electric chair becoming his certain fate, the more abstract offerings of religion become central to his incarceration.

The racialization of the inmates acts to discourage Clyde from seeing himself as one of them while also providing further reason to see Dreiser's turn to existentialism as ushering in Black Jesus. The prison and almost all of its inhabitants can be characterized as non-white, even if only two prisoners – the Chinaman and the Negro Wash Higgins – are explicitly detailed as being non-white. America at this time was, as mentioned above, bifurcated racially, but ambiguities still existed regarding where particular ethnicities and nationalities fit in the social hierarchy. As some scholars like David R. Roediger and Noel Ignatiev have noted, some people with ancestry in southern and eastern Europe, as well as Ireland, gradually "became white." Outside the prison, Pasquale Cutrone (an Italian Catholic) and the unnamed young Jewish man may have attained white status, but their place in the prison links them more closely with non-white Others like the Chinaman and the Negro. Clyde, in turn, rejects solidarity with the lot of them, and he unsurprisingly finds comfort in companionship with Nicholson, a refined white man (the surnames of Griffiths and Nicholson suggest descent from the more privileged white groups in America). Clyde's rejection of the non-whiteness of the prison demonstrates the hierarchal racial component involved in defining the in/out and above/below in American society, and it indicates that a move into the spaces that are out or below is a move into a racialized space.[9] Although Black Jesus is not limited to spaces which are explicitly non-white, within a white supremacist society like America racialized spaces are

[9] Dreiser is known to employ racial hierarchy in constructing the Naturalistic world of his fiction, as many scholars (including Christopher Gair and Thomas L. Morgan) have noted. Dreiser's own prejudices have been commented on by Jerome Loving and others, but scholars like John Dudley have also noted some progressive, anti-racist moments in his oeuvre as well. Relevant to this discussion is the fact that Dreiser utilized contemporary notions of racial hierarchy to inform the structure of his fiction.

more marginalized and more oppressed, making Black Jesus the appropriate transcendental figure to meet Clyde in the prison.

Furthermore, Black Jesus is a suitable atmosphere for the prison as the American carceral system is, in its very nature, an institution weaponized against Black Americans and other minorities based on race/ethnicity and nationality. As Michelle Alexander and others have noted, mass incarceration post-Civil Rights Movement has targeted Black Americans to devastating effect, but the use of prison systems as a tool to remove Black people from society has been practiced since before the American Civil War. Jacksonian-Era reformers tailored the emerging penitentiary system to remove "deviants" from society (Rothman 71), and this practice was racially retooled and augmented during Reconstruction in an era of intense, vengeful anti-Black sentiment and growing Nativism. During this era, "the rate of imprisonment of [foreign born Americans] was twice that of native born, and for colored persons it was three times higher" (Christianson 190). The world of *An American Tragedy*, located between Reconstruction and the Civil Rights Movement, exhibited similar statistics: "between 1930 and 1936 black incarceration rates had risen substantially to a level about three times greater than those for whites, while the white incarceration rate actually had decreased" (Christianson 229). The United States has, for centuries, imprisoned a staggering number of people, and from the beginning this carceral system has been marked as a space conspicuously populated by non-white people, racializing the inmate in the national imagination. Anyone who finds themselves in an American prison – including a white man like Clyde Griffiths

– finds themselves in an atmosphere of anti-blackness, but besides being populated by a disproportionate number of Black persons, this space also houses Black Jesus.

Faith begins to work on Clyde when he begins to see himself as a co-sufferer. Spaces of suffering – like a cross, a lynching tree, and a prison – are the spaces in which Black Jesus appears, but Clyde cannot have an encounter with this figure until he sets aside the arrogance which he carries with him into the inferno. When he first arrives, Clyde is terrified of the other prisoners and likens them to hungry animals, despite their general amicability. He is self-absorbed, horrified, and embarrassed by the thought of what other people would think if they were to see him there. However, change begins to take place in Clyde as he suffers with the other men, for the physical design of the prison is such that "a man, once condemned by a jury, would be compelled to suffer not alone the death for which his sentence called, but a thousand others before that" (798). Besides their general lack of privacy, the prisoners are spectators to the final death march each man takes on the day of his execution to the room at the end of the hall. Despite being isolated from the world, the experience of death row and the anticipation of execution becomes a communal experience. Clyde's encounter with this is vividly described in the final days of Pasquale Cutrone. As the Italian's fateful day approaches, he enters into a constant state of fervent prayer, "crawling up and down his cell on his hands and knees, kissing the floor, licking the feet of a brass Christ on a cross that had been given to him" (810). The prisoners are aware of his demonstrative penitence as he, "all night and all day long…did this crawling to and fro and praying, and those who were awake…were compelled to listen to his mumbled prayers, the click of the beads of a rosary on which he was

numbering numberless Our Fathers and Hail Marys" (811). Clyde observes first-hand how these men – scorned by society and immured in this deep, dark place of death – conduct themselves in their final days, whether they "cried, prayed," or "lost their minds" (811). And, in Cutrone's final moments, Clyde sees the inmates' sympathy engendered by suffering. For, rather than mock Cutrone, they show some understanding of his contrition and fear, and they offer their condolences: "'Good-by, Cutrone!' It was a hoarse, shaky voice from some near-by cell – Clyde could not tell which. 'Go to a better world than this.' And then other voices: 'Good-by, Cutrone. God keep you – even though you can't talk English'" (812-3). The inmates offer kind words to a stranger which Clyde would not have given any of them when he first arrived. In Cutrone's final days, Clyde sees both a spiritual conviction and an empathetic solidarity previously unknown to him, and the experience moves him to begin to put some hope in Christian spirituality.

Clyde's turn to the metaphysical is also catalyzed by the sympathetic mercy of the Reverend McMillan. Even though McMillan in some ways symbolizes the kind of religious practice Clyde despises, Clyde comes to see this "strange, strong, tense, confused, merciful" man's (817) faith in a new way:

> Just the same the mood, as well as the temperament of the Reverend Duncan McMillan – his young, forceful, convinced and dramatic body, face, eyes, now intrigued and then moved Clyde as no religionist or minister in all his life before ever had…. The personal conviction and force of such an individual as the Reverend McMillan, while in one sense an old story to Clyde and not anything which so late as eighteen months before could have moved him in any way (since all his life he had been accustomed to something like it), still here, under these circumstances, affected him differently.

> Incarcerated, withdrawn from the world, compelled by highly circumscribed nature of this death house life to find solace or relief in his own thoughts… (823)

Affected by the communal suffering and solidarity of the inmates, Clyde finds a new appreciation for McMillan's efforts to enter into the prison and minister to Clyde's soul. The message McMillan preaches to Clyde is still, in many respects, a reiteration of the religiosity Clyde has rejected, but Clyde's experience in prison helps him to recognize the kernels of mercy at the heart of the reverend's zeal. Because McMillan is physically present in Clyde's place of suffering and its accompanying atmosphere, his exhortations for Clyde to turn from sin and find solace in Christ are less like a directive being spoken *at* him and more like a message being uncovered *with* him. McMillan is truly moved by Clyde's condition and offers his presence as much as his wisdom: "'Don't worry, Clyde,' replied the tortured and saddened McMillan, at this point more eager to take him in his arms and comfort him than to say anything at all" (842). McMillan's ministry helps Clyde to experience Christian spirituality in a new way, adopting it without the trappings of orthodoxy and orthopraxy and embracing the solace it offers which he now understands as a profound message of mercy and solidarity rather than an imposing dogma.

Plunged beneath the floor of his comfortable existence into the Hell of the prison, Clyde's revelations in his torrid final days bring him to an encounter with Black Jesus. Black Jesus is the Jesus who bears the suffering of others, whose burden of the cross and mission of ministry "is found among the least, the crucified people of the world" (Cone 23), hidden in suffering rather than the glory of empire or the piety of moralism (Williams 3). Death row is precisely where we might expect to find this

theological concept at work, and its appearance in *An American Tragedy* is clear, albeit abstracted. Some of the symbolism is overt; the prison-as-Hell alludes to Jesus' descent into Hell after his crucifixion, and the walk to the end of the hall and the electric chair sounds very much like Jesus' walk to Golgotha along the *Via Dolorosa*. However, the lack of more explicit images, such as a crucified Christ, allows the novel to avoid the risks of realistic representation and reproductions of scenes of subjection which Harper and Hartman warn against. Instead, Clyde's spiritual experience, which is filled with some degree of fear and doubt to the bitter end, becomes more profound and meaningful for him and potentially for the reader as the space opened through abstraction is occupied by Black Jesus. The novel's construction of a realist space which abhors what lies below even as that lower boundary is eroded by hellish visions alludes to a mysterious, abstract space, a space which the novel finally enters in the prison. But rather than signal the destruction of Clyde's spiritual life, prison lays bare his fallacious perception of himself as a member of elite society, bringing him to seek satisfaction not in the materialism he once pursued but in some sort of existential salve. When he enters this atmosphere outside of societal constructs, the change he feels is not marked by a sudden embrace of the religion of his parents or a literal Christ figure, but the figure of Black Jesus found in Pasquale's murmured prayers, the inmates' solidarity, McMillan's empathetic mercy, and Clyde's own reckoning with the end of his days.

Clyde's experience – and the end of that experience – does not lead to a tidy resolution, but the moments after his death from McMillan's perspective underscore the weight and complexity of Clyde's story. McMillan emerges from the prison "gray

and weary" (852) and haunted by Clyde's eyes in his final moments. Sure that some change took place in Clyde but uncertain of the destination of Clyde's soul, the affected Reverend reflects on the injustice of the prison system: "The law! Prisons such as this. Strong, evil men who scoffed betimes where Clyde had prayed" (852). McMillan recognizes the magnitude of Clyde's experience as a young man wrestling with the big questions of life after death after being coldly locked away by a society and a system which was always engineered to destroy people like Clyde. McMillan does not come away from the prison reciting platitudes or justifying Clyde's death on account of the young man's moral shortcomings, but instead turns attention again to the weight of Clyde's experience in the darkest depths of society. And, whether he is cognizant or not, McMillan may recognize the characteristics of "prisons such as this" work to not only punish supposed deviancy but also subjugate particular people deemed socially undesirable. Perhaps as he emerges from the prison into the "silent street" and leans against a "bare and bleak" tree (853), he feels the change in atmosphere between the depths of the prison and the society which he is so comfortably a part of. Perhaps it is not just Clyde's eyes which haunt the reverend, but also a premonition of the cold heart of the society which has consigned particular members to the Inferno.

An American Tragedy is a scathing critique of the brand of religion woven into American society which seems overly-concerned with pious behavior, but reading Black Jesus into Clyde's prison experience rounds out the novel's religious commentary to give life to the alternative – a Christian faith which attends to the suffering of the downtrodden and oppressed. Jesus according to American

fundamentalist Christianity – a white Christ – does not enter into the Hell which Clyde tries to avoid, that place below. Any sunken place is where Black Jesus exists, and encounters with this figure are not limited to the experience of Black Americans, but rather to anyone who descends into the depths which a culture of comfort, success, and material gain tries to bury beneath a stable floor of existence. Dreiser's vision of American society alludes to this space as it constructs a realistic representation of that society, and though the descent into this space is the end of one American's tragedy, the configuration of Black Jesus in this space leaves the door open for the redemption of this tragedy.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have argued for using a two-thousand-year-old figure for developing new readings of literature. While invoking the Christ figure in literature and film studies has become a tired trope of criticism and interpretation, I contend that revising our definition of what can constitute a Christ figure by drawing upon progressive visions of Jesus – namely, Black Jesus – opens the door to innovative reading methods which enrich our understanding of texts and the purview of theology. These progressive visions of Jesus are not new, but they are subversive and counter the dominant paradigms of theology and Christology in America. Black Jesus and liberation theology are as important as ever. The election of Donald Trump has demonstrated the influence of white supremacy on Christianity (and vice versa), and, in response, radical theologies of resistance are all the more necessary. Even as America becomes more secular, questions of theology, religion, Christianity, and Jesus remain relevant.

I have worked towards four primary goals: I offered methods for recognizing and utilizing abstractionist aesthetics (even in primarily realist works) while demonstrating the advantages of those methods; I envisioned Black Jesus in texts to enrich our understandings of those texts; I engaged those depictions of Black Jesus to enrich theology and Christology; I established Black Jesus as a means of drawing together disparate texts and experiences. By accomplishing these goals, it is my hope that I have brought literature and theology together in a meaningful way, which can prompt critical thought and action, generating ethical responses to a historical

moment in which the Christian religion has been weaponized against the very people with whom Jesus walked.

My particular use of abstractionist aesthetics is one of many ways to address the problems facing realist interpretation. The variability and versatility of abstraction is a source of its strength, as it opens up possibilities that may have been closed off to reader's expectations for realism. Realism still holds immense value, but it is worthwhile and beneficial to make creative attempts at imagining the possibilities of abstract interpretation, even more so when studying African American art because realism poses certain restrictions on interpretations of images of Black bodies. If we are to give Jesus critical attention commensurate with his cultural power, let it not be by way of scouring literature for thirty-three-year-olds with pierced wrists, but for abstract allusions to the concerns and anxieties about which Black Jesus is so concerned. The type and range of these interpretations is to be celebrated, even if they make Christ figures more challenging to spot in introductory literature courses.

Accounting for these new Christ figures recuperates the figure's usefulness while providing a way into valuable literary insights. Black Jesus can enrich our study of literature as the work of invoking and configuring Black Jesus involves critical yet expansive considerations of a text's nuances. *Infants of the Spring* and *An American Tragedy* are both much more spiritual than existing scholarship would suggest, and Black Jesus highlights the nature of the existential concerns facing the characters. Exploring the abstract elements of a text and reading Black Jesus into those spaces allows for complexity, ambiguity, and nuance even as accounts of the text's meaning and relationship to its cultural context may have become rote and narrow. This

methodology facilitates a separation of religion and spirituality, thus ushering in a host of transcendental, mystical, or phenomenological interpretations that may have been closed off by a text's supposed irreligiosity.

Reading Black Jesus into literary texts gives the theological concept space to act and connects theory to praxis. Envisioning Black Jesus at work in a novel can open our mind to Black Jesus' applicability to present and future situations. Christology which comes only from religious doctrine may leave aspects of Jesus untested, but engaging the figure via literature can reveal remarkable ways Jesus can work. My reading of Black Jesus in *Infants of the Spring* highlights aspects of Jesus such as his queerness, his existence outside of space and time (and thus his appropriate fit within the similarly expansive Middle Passage), while my reading of *An American Tragedy* emphasizes Jesus' resistance to capitalist oppression and his presence in the lowest dredges of society. These readings make our Christology more versatile and vibrant, and engender a theology that is more suited to addressing real world problems. Configuring Black Jesus in literature also helps put into focus the failures of the white Jesus, as my readings of both texts reveal that white Jesus and the society built on white supremacist Christianity are a part of the systems oppressing the novels' characters.

This project is and always has been especially attuned to African American literature and cultural studies, but part of that focus has meant a broad application of this critical study. Without misappropriating or diluting minoritarian texts and theoretical concepts, it has been important to this study to avoid putting Black Jesus into a neat box of African American Literature and African American studies, which

would give the false impression that Black Jesus is just for Black people or just for Black art. Harper, Hartman, Palumbo-Liu, and others are all working on the premise that isolating minoritarian studies in this way acts to instill in white audiences passive consumption or reassuring catharsis. Black Jesus has been introduced to me via African American art, culture, and theology, but the figure is by no means limited to those spaces. If Black Jesus is contained within racially-defined boxes, then Black Jesus becomes just another version of Jesus, when the revolutionary truth is that Jesus *is* Black Jesus. The Christian faith exhibited in Harlem which transformed Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology and worldview brings us closer to an understanding of Jesus the Nazarene than any rendering of the white Jesus, the false Jesus in a religion at the heart of oppressive ideological apparatuses. So, even if *An American Tragedy* is a "white" novel, we are not required to envision any appearance of Jesus in the novel as white. Rather, the nature of Clyde's suffering demands that, if a Christ figure appears, it is a Black Christ figure. By configuring Black Jesus in this novel, I have demonstrated Black Jesus' potential to make connections across vast difference.

Whether or not academia engages with the Christ figure, it is clear that Jesus maintains a prominent place in American culture. It is important to recognize that even the most fundamentalist strains of Christianity in America are themselves socially-constructed, culturally-influenced evolutions of an ancient Middle Eastern religion, because this reminds us that evoking Jesus is not an invitation to lean on what is rigid and stale, but rather on what is living and active. There has been a Jesus for every time and place for the past two thousand years, and although it is, in a sense, the same Jesus, our understanding of that figure has continued to evolve. Progressive,

innovative, imaginative readings of Jesus in literature are there for us to find, and encountering the Christ figure in this way is not only possible, but ethical and reparative as well.

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