A Gift Grows in the Ghetto

Reimagining the Spiritual Lives of Black Men

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Foreword

Not My Father's Jazz

A hollow gasp escaped his lungs, and he was gone. Through the doctor's pronouncement, the sorrowed wail, and the analog beep-beep of medical devices, only white noise filled my ears. As the fluorescent emergency room dulled to grey, my neurons numbed, and a steely reserve occupied my heart. Deadened to grief, I flipped the default switch to care. I figured my father would want it that way, yet as I was his firstborn son, we shared more than a name. We were friends, a privilege not granted to him by his own father.

Seven days after my father's final breath, thousands gathered for his funeral. Under the cross, I preached my father's eulogy while accompanied by a jazz cellist. Before the throngs, I reflected on the life of one born in the wilderness of the segregated South and raised in exile by a single mother. Yet within this child of patrilineal desertion a divine gift of telling stories with numbers would grow. In step with the cello's beat, we remembered his four decades of service as an accountant, his devotion to family, and his commitment to God.

Weeks after the homegoing, while sorting through a crate of dusty collectibles, I excavate my father's favorite jazz record and rush to the turntable. When the needle pricks the well-worn vinyl on the spinning plate, Grover Washington's "Mister Magic" warms the room. Yet it is not just Washington's saxophone that fills every crevice, for this familiar song conjures the ancestral presence of my father. As the syncopated tones move within me, I am transported back to the dawning hours of December 18, 1999. Awakened that morning by "Mister Magic," I found my father with closed eyes in his leather recliner. Silent tears cascaded down his grizzled beard. When the song ended, he opened his eyes and whispered, "Grover died." It was one of two times when I witnessed my father cry. Or shall I say, my father invited me to witness the vulnerability of his tears.

Since that day, the mere sound of jazz untethers emotions. So it perplexed me when the same kind of released repression occurred while reading *A Gift Grows in the Ghetto*. Uncharacteristic of many theologians, Hinds writes with lyrical complexity, unexpected crescendo, and improvisational surprise. Thus

when I began drafting this foreword, I envisioned this assignment more as crafting liner notes for an album than as a preface for a book.

Though Hinds credits himself as a lover of John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, and Charles Mingus, his style of writing is not my father's jazz. The chapter subheadings that frame this book are characteristic of an intellectual artist groomed by the grit of East Orange's ghettos in the 1980s rather than the nightclubs of Harlem in the mid-twentieth century. Hear these subheadings: "The Doryphoros Redux," "The Rage of a Hopeless Son," "Sambo Kills Uncle Tom," "No Place to Grow a Man," and "The Fantasy of the Goodie Goodies." Are these not reminiscent of album tracks? Have you heard of a pastoral theological text with such edginess?

While the subheadings sound like sensational riffs, Hinds layers his arguments with complexity and depth. I recall watching a documentary on the famed jazz pianist Thelonious Monk. In one scene, two professional pianists struggle to duplicate on two pianos a swift improvisational run that Monk made with ten fingers. Similar to Monk, Hinds demonstrates dexterity as he weaves together theories from an Egyptologist, a Hebrew scholar, a Womanist theologian, and a hip-hop icon in one chapter while paralleling the biographies of Viennese psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and Harlem-bound protest-novelist Richard Wright in another.

Most impressive is Hinds's artistic gift of seizing his audience's attention and transporting them to another place. As he told the story of Hagar, I saw for the first time my grandmother and her children escaping under the cover of nightfall to find refuge in another state. Likewise, I could see my teenaged father enduring slights from peers who had introjected subjugation as he entered his public high school in a suit and tie with briefcase in tow. Both he and Hinds are testaments that priceless gifts grow in the ghetto.

Now, Beloved Reader, I invite you to turn the page and prepare to be moved by a sound that will alter your vision of the ghetto and the gifts therein.

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Introduction

No Humans, No God, and No Gifts

> The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
> the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
> like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,
> and rejoice with joy and singing.
>
> —*Isaiah 35:1–2*

> This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. Let me spell out precisely what I mean by that, for the heart of the matter is here, and the root of my dispute with my country. You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever.[1]
>
> —*James Baldwin*

In the fall of 1992, cultural theorist Sylvia Wynter wrote an open letter to her colleagues in higher academia. Wynter had been disturbed by the events preceding, during, and following the 1992 Los Angeles riots. In March 1991, her eyes had seen the terrifying video of Rodney King, an African American man, mercilessly beaten by police officers while more than a dozen other officers stood and looked, doing nothing. The fifteen-minute attack left King with multiple skull fractures, broken bones and teeth, and, worst of all, permanent brain damage. The video caused such a national furor that four of the officers were charged with excessive use of force. On April 29, 1992, about a year after they were charged, all four of the officers were acquitted. Then the riots started. According to reliable sources, the riots began at the corner of

Florence and Normandie in South Los Angeles when four young Black men attacked a white truck driver named Reginald Denny. The spark of anger that started at that intersection soon became a consuming fire of communal rage that spread throughout the city. Residents set fires, looted and destroyed stores, and continued to attack motorists for weeks. While this was happening, something else was going on about which the nightly news didn't speak. But it was something that Sylvia Wynter noticed, and she believed her colleagues needed to know about it as well.

Wynter discovered that "public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving the breach of rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner-city ghettoes."[2] What did N.H.I. mean? "No Humans Involved."[3] Wynter says that classifying the persons in these ghetto neighborhoods in this manner gave "the police of Los Angeles the green light to deal with its members [particularly young Black males] in any way they pleased."[4] This segment of the population was deemed unworthy of being treated as human beings. In his book *Wasted Lives*, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman observes that such persons are considered superfluous because of their low social status and are therefore disposable. "The American black ghetto," Bauman observes, "has turned purely and simply into a virtually single-purpose, waste disposal tip."[5] The ghetto is the home for wasted humans.

There was more to Wynter's letter, however, than making her colleagues aware of the N.H.I. controversy. In the letter she confesses that she wants to start a conversation about this disdain for Black life and, more to the point, how she and her colleagues in the academy perpetuate the problem.[6] Wynter's point is that there is a common view of Black people held among the four police officers who beat King; the mostly white, middle-class jurors who acquitted the officers; and "the best and brightest graduates of both the professional and non-professional schools of the university system of the United States."[7] There is a "system of classification" that they all adhere to, whether knowingly or unknowingly. Wynter asks,

> How did they [i.e., "the best and the brightest"] come to conceive of what it means to be both *human* and *North American* in the *kinds* of *terms* (i.e., to be White, of Euroamerican culture and descent, middle-class, college-educated, and suburban) within whose logic, the jobless and usually school drop-out/push-out category of young Black males can be *perceived*, and *therefore behaved towards*, only as the *Lack* of the human, the Conceptual Other to being North American?[8]

It's a question worth considering, even today. How, exactly, do persons who are part of the educated class, some of whom have graduated from the world's

most prestigious institutions, maintain and, in some cases, build on the system of classification that created and dispersed the N.H.I. acronym? Race and racism, structural and otherwise, are integral in all of this, of course. But race is only part of an ongoing process of classification, including but not limited to class and gender, that creates an order of knowledge that differentiates the human from the nonhuman. Wynter absolves neither herself nor her colleagues, for she asks whether the N.H.I. acronym and its practice were created by persons "whom we ourselves would have educated?"[9] These educators, she claims, are at the center of the present order of knowledge that is "disseminated in our present university system and its correlated textbook industry."[10] These are used, essentially, to instill a certain point of view within students, and Black students suffer from the same miseducation.

Historian Carter G. Woodson saw the negative effects of this practice back in the early twentieth century when, in *The Mis-education of the Negro*, he wrote that the "point of view" taught in classrooms affects white and Black students differently. Black students, Carter writes, are taught to be inferior:

> At a Negro summer school two years ago, a white instructor gave a course on the Negro, using for his text a work which teaches that whites are superior to the Blacks. When asked by one of the students why he used such a textbook the instructor replied that he wanted them to get that point of view. Even schools for Negroes, then, are places where they must be convinced of their inferiority.
>
> The thought of the inferiority of the Negro is drilled into him in almost every class he enters and in almost every book he studies.[11]

In the end, though, Woodson attests that this miseducation is harmful to those designated as inferior because it "kills one's aspirations and dooms him to vagabondage and crime."[12] As for white students, Woodson states,

> It is strange, then, that the friends of truth and the promoters of freedom have not risen up against the present propaganda in the schools and crushed it. This crusade is much more important that the anti-lynching movement, because there would be no lynching if it did not start in the classroom. Why not exploit, enslave, or exterminate a class that everybody is taught to regard as inferior?[13]

Psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, who wrote extensively on youth and identity, pointed out that, in the classroom and beyond, whites are instructed not only that they are superior but that it is their exclusive right to maintain this superiority, at any means necessary. "It is true that the [white male] is offered special chances and privileges in order to make him define his own identity in the narrow and uniform terms demanded by the system."[14] This is a pivotal point

for Wynter, particularly in relation to the state-sanctioned violence against young Black males. Three decades since Wynter issued the letter to her colleagues at Stanford University and throughout higher academia, and nearly a century since Woodson's *The Mis-education of the Negro*, a question hangs in the air: "Has anything changed?"

NO GOD IN THE GHETTO

On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis police officers arrested George Floyd, a Black man, after a convenience-store employee called 911 to report that Floyd had bought cigarettes with a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. About twenty minutes later, the first group of police officers arrived on the scene. Derek Chauvin, one of the police officers, pinned Floyd to the ground, keeping his knee on Floyd's neck for more than eight minutes, all while Floyd gasped for air. Chauvin kept his knee on Floyd's neck as a sign of his disregard for Floyd's humanity (i.e., N.H.I.) and refused to remove it until well after his death. The following day protesters took to the streets of Minneapolis-St. Paul, but it was only the beginning of the unrest. Minneapolis was the flashpoint that sparked a series of fiery responses to the murders of unarmed Black men and women, such as Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta; Aubrey Ahmad in Brunswick, GA; and Breonna Taylor in Louisville, KY, to name but a few. Almost thirty years after the brutal beating of Rodney King and the ensuing Los Angeles riots in 1992, it is evident that we are still being miseducated into the point of view that categorizes Black people—especially young Black men—as nonhuman.

Perhaps N.H.I. is no longer officially used by law enforcement, but the tragic events of 2020 prove that the disdain for young Black males hasn't changed. Doubtless many of the concerns raised by Sylvia Wynter back in 1992 are relevant to our current situation. Has the "misrecognition of human kinship," to use Wynter's phrase, improved over the last three decades?[15]

As an educator in the theological academy, I wonder how Wynter's letter applies to those of us educating the "best and the brightest" church leaders, that is, those trained in seminaries, divinity schools, and so on throughout the United States. How did the strong adherents of the doctrines of racial inferiority use theology and Scripture to classify young Black males as the accursed other? William A. Jones Jr., who pastored a church in the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of Brooklyn for more than forty years, writes in *God in the Ghetto* that "the black man's relationship to God was the cause of serious debate during the early years of American slavery."[16] He also adds that "preachers, many of whom were slaveowners, sought to develop a theological justification for the profitable institution of human slavery."[17] The end of

slavery didn't stop this form of theology, however. It persisted well into the twentieth century.

African American theologian Willie James Jennings recounts when his mother, Mary Jennings, a devout Christian, was approached by two white men from a local church, doing some evangelizing it seems, whom he could tell doubted his mother's faith or, put another way, her relationship with God.[18] Before walking into the backyard of the Jennings's home and greeting his mother, the two white men had already categorized the family as non-Christian. Jennings shares that he "thought it incredibly odd that they never once asked her if she went to church, if she was Christian, or even if she believed in God."[19] Jennings admits that his own theological quest has been inspired by such experiences, which, as he claims, is "fueled [by] a question that has grown in hermeneutic force for me: Why did they not know us? They should have known us very well."[20] *But how could they?* The two white men who did not recognize Ms. Jennings's faith *knew* all too well, due to their own Christian miseducation, that she could not be a real Christian. Why would they think otherwise? Viewing Ms. Jennings's faith as equal to their own would have meant that her humanity was just as valuable as theirs—a notion unacceptable to them. Similar to the public officials and juridical system in Los Angeles that created and utilized the N.H.I. acronym, these two white men had been instructed to believe that when encountering a Black person, they were not to regard such persons as the chosen, that is, as persons having a relationship with God. I propose that this misrecognition is deadlier than the N.H.I. acronym, for in such acts it is being announced, in essence, that there is a category of persons, living in certain locales, that God has abandoned. Perhaps we should think of a new acronym: N.G.I., meaning "No God Involved." This is the classification used when considering the spiritual lives of Black people in the ghetto, particularly young Black males. Please note, however, that this is not a white Christian church problem alone. The Black Christian church is guilty of using the same mode of classification as well.

In their foundational text *Black Metropolis*, sociologists St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton mention how inner-city churches disparaged residents of the community. They share that in the Bronzeville district of Chicago there were "500 churches, at least 300 of these being located in definitely lower-class neighborhoods."[21] According to the authors, the churches in Bronzeville were sustained by a faithful few who were instructed to reject the "Devil" and the "Sin" that were plaguing the city's streets. A sermon by a local pastor conveys his church's view of the neighborhood's residents:

> Why, the people have lost all self-respect, and most of our children are brought up in homes where there is strife, anger, and viciousness

> all the time. Some of you people lie down mad and get up mad. Just cursing and swearing all the time over the children. I sometimes wonder can't you that live that sort of life find a place for Jesus in your homes. That's where to start a remedy, right in your home life.[22]

The message: Your life would be better if God were present—really present—in your home. Some of the more derisive sermons, though, were directed toward the city's Black men. Another local pastor remarks, "You lazy, kidney-kneed men are too lazy to work. You have these poor women out in some white person's kitchen or laundry, and you go out for your meals, and then stand around the corners the rest of the day being sissies."[23] The congregants who heard these sermons drew a stark distinction between themselves and those outside the walls of the church, many of whom were trapped in the patterns of disorganization identified with ghetto life. Drake and Cayton remark that "to some lower-class people, however, identification with the church is considered the better alternative of a forced option: complete personal disorganization or 'serving the Lord.'"[24]

Novelist James Baldwin, who confesses that he "fled into the church" to avoid the streets, describes the seemingly godless environs of his youth in Harlem:

> The wages of sin were visible everywhere, in every wine-stained and urine-splashed hallway, in every clanging ambulance bell, in every scar on the faces of the pimps and their whores, in every helpless, newborn baby being brought into this danger, in every knife and pistol fight on the Avenue, and in every disastrous bulletin: a cousin, mother of six, suddenly gone mad, the children parceled out here and there; an indestructible aunt rewarded for years of hard labor by a slow agonizing death in a terrible small room; someone's bright son blown into eternity by his own hand; another turned robber and carried off to jail.[25]

Baldwin, who was a holiness preacher during his teenage years, was a member of the Fireside Pentecostal Assembly on 136th Street, a fundamentalist church. In *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto 1890–1930*, historian Gilbert Osofsky says that leaders of these nontraditional Black churches in Harlem preached "a fundamentalism which centered around the scheming ways of Satan, who was everywhere, and the terror and joy of divine retribution, with an emphasis on terror."[26] The place congregants in these churches feared most was the immediate environment—the street and the people—outside the sacred four walls of the church.

Sociologist Omar McRoberts points out that for "these churches, the street was the world urbanized, and the world was not only 'profane' but full

of evil."[27] R. Drew Smith, a scholar of urban ministry, explores the various ways the urban poor are isolated from church. In his essay "Churches and the Urban Poor: Interaction and Social Distance," Smith argues that scholars have focused "on the ways that churches have extended themselves to the urban poor but generally not on whether, in doing so, they have actually connected with them."[28] To better understand the situation, Smith observed two large, low-income public housing complexes in Indianapolis, Indiana. The public housing complexes were within a mile of fifty churches, all of which, Smith notes, were predominately Black. The data from his research revealed that "churches, though an important spiritual and social resource for some low-income families, have not been a significant factor in the lives of the majority of the families in the housing complexes surveyed in Indianapolis."[29] And why? "Churches, on their part, fail to grapple with the life-worlds of socially marginalized and disaffected populations to the point of being challenged on the exclusive conceptions of community prevailing among many of these congregations," writes Smith.[30] There are congregations that do have interactions with the immediate environment through charitable organizations and events (food pantries, clothing drives, etc.), but Smith identifies these as *indirect* forms of interaction. In sum, they do not directly interact with the people from the streets in such a way that these persons feel included in the church's community and, by extension, God's community. Needless to say, it matters little whether it is Harlem, Compton, or the South Side of Chicago—these are neighborhoods where it is believed no God is involved (N.G.I.), not only in the streets but even more so in the lives of the people.

What is often overlooked is that these negative classifications also lead to a host of harmful acts. N.H.I., says Wynter, gave law enforcement officials in Los Angeles considerable latitude to use excessive force when interacting with ghetto residents. In other instances, officers faced no punishment if they chose not to respond to an emergency in certain N.H.I. neighborhoods. Similarly, one could argue that N.G.I. gives Christian clergy and laypersons the authority, so to speak, to enact spiritual violence against those deemed godless. What does this spiritual violence look like? And who are its most noticeable victims?

THE BIGGER PROBLEM

Bigger Thomas is a problem. The main character of Richard Wright's *Native Son* remains a model not only of the dangers of life in the ghetto but of how such a life makes a person dangerous. Bigger's life has become the cautionary answer to W. E. B. Du Bois's harrowing inquiry "How does it feel to be a

problem?"[31] Wright biographer Margaret Walker says that "his great achievement in his novels is his application of modern psychology and philosophy to black and white racial patterns and human personality, and to the black male, who is seen as an outcast, criminal, or marginal man."[32] In his analysis of Bigger in "How Bigger Was Born," Wright explains that in his own life he had encountered a number of Biggers. These were real-life, young, Black males who exhibited the characteristics of the fictional Bigger Thomas.[33] They were angry young men. They also suffered from unstable emotional lives, moving back and forth between "moods of intense elation and depression."[34] The melancholy was brought on by the "impossibility of his ever being free."[35] Because of this lack of hope, Wright saw something else when diagnosing the problem with these real-life Biggers. Their spirits were broken. For many of them the ghetto had become more than their location. It had become their way of life; it was all consuming and evident, as one person told Wright, that "the white folks won't let us do nothing."[36] Wright claims that the person who said this to him went crazy, literally, and was "sent to the asylum for the insane."[37] The white folks wouldn't let him do anything.

A similar claim of hopelessness is made in *Native Son* by the fictional Bigger Thomas during a conversation with his friends:

> "Look!" Bigger said.
> "What?"
> "That plane writing up there," Bigger said, pointing.
> "Oh!"
> They squinted at a tiny ribbon of unfolding vapor that spelled out the word: USE . . . The plane was so far away that at times the strong glare of the sun blanked it from sight.
> "You can hardly see it," Gus said.
> "Looks like a little bird," Bigger breathed with childlike wonder.
> "Them white boys sure can fly," Gus said.
> "Yeah," Bigger said, wistfully. "They get a chance to do everything."[38]

Later in the conversation, Bigger laments,

> "Goddammit!"
> "What's the matter?"
> "They don't let us do nothing."
> "Who?"
> "The white folks."[39]

Wright encountered numerous Biggers in the South during his youth and then later in Chicago, where he worked with young men at the South Side Boys' Club, and then in Harlem, where he helped establish the Lafargue Mental Hygiene Clinic. He discovered that these young Black men were

unable "to belong, to be identified, to feel that they were alive as other people were."[40] Other people could fly. Other people had hope. Other people were alive. Not the Biggers. Their lives were consumed by what Wright describes as "an objectless, timeless, spaceless element of primal fear and dread . . . a fear and dread which exercises an impelling influence upon our lives."[41]

The most perplexing issue, though, is that, based on bad faith, many believe that neither Bigger Thomas nor the countless other Biggers have the spiritual resources to contend with and, ultimately, overcome this hopelessness. These Biggers, according to Wright, have been subjected, repeatedly, to a spiritual violence that has left them feeling absolute estrangement, not only from their community but from God. "Estranged from the religion and folk culture of his race," as Wright puts it.[42] Bigger was trapped in a world wherein "metaphysical meanings had vanished; a world in which God no longer existed as a daily focal point of men's lives; a world in which men could no longer retain their faith in an ultimate hereafter."[43] All of Bigger's focus, it seems, was on the white boys who "get a chance to do everything."[44] This was his ultimate concern—his faith.

At the core of the spiritual violence, though, is the belief that these young Black males, the Biggers, are not worthy of relationships. Given what has been purported about his character (e.g., depraved, lazy, salacious, etc.) and what he has been called (e.g., Nigger, Sambo, "the goddamn scum of the earth"[45]), who, I ask, would want to be in a relationship, of any kind, with a Bigger? The truth is, however, that no Bigger is truly alone. Let's just use the example of the interactions between young Black males in the ghetto and law enforcement. When excessive police force, which often leads to death, is deemed the only means by which the Bigger can be dealt with, what these officers fail to consider—in their "reflex anti-Black male behavior-prescriptions"[46]—is that they are traumatizing and, in some instances, destroying a web of relationships. They forget that Bigger is someone's son, husband, brother, nephew, friend. They forget—or choose to ignore—that Bigger—no matter his perceived fallenness—is someone's *gift*.

UNDERSTANDING SPIRITUALITY AND THE GIFT

N.G.I. is a spiritual crisis for young Black men. It therefore requires a spiritual remedy. By framing the crisis in this manner, I am not suggesting that neither the socioeconomic nor the psychological challenges confronting African American men be set aside. Rather, by claiming the value of spirituality, I am uplifting a mode of existence that, when allowed to grow, is a communally oriented, culturally relevant, and effective means of responding creatively to

the destructive isolation of the ghetto. This book contends that the spirituality of Black men must be reimagined as grounded in and nourished by their identity as a gift. But what is meant by the word *spirituality*? *Merriam-Webster* provides the following definitions: 1) "something that in ecclesiastical law belongs to the church or to a cleric as such"; 2) "clergy"; 3) "sensitivity of attachment to religious values"; 4) "the quality or state of being spiritual."[47] Spirituality is more than what this definition suggests, however. Kenneth Pargament, a scholar of religious belief and health, suggests that whereas religion is "restricted to institutionally based dogma, rituals, and tradition," spirituality "is generally described as a highly individualized search for the sense of connectedness with a transcendent force."[48] Yet spirituality is more than what Pargament suggests. Scholar of Christian spirituality E. Glenn Hinson points out that spirituality in the Protestant tradition has various contemporary expressions, such as secular and charismatic forms of spirituality. Charismatic spirituality, for instance, "emphasized experiential religion, speaking in tongues or glossolalia being only one, though an important, expression."[49] According to Hinson, one of the problems with contemporary expressions of spirituality is its focus on the individual. "Protestants," Hinson attests, "have placed responsibility on the shoulders of individuals and have de-emphasized corporate means and duties."[50]

Other shades of spirituality further problematize the definitions offered by Pargament and Hinson. Contrary to Pargament's definition, for instance, African American spirituality does not uplift the "connectedness to a transcendent force" exclusively but also endeavors to be in relationship with an immanent God. In the *Spirituality of African Peoples*, Christian ethicist Peter J. Paris notes, "The 'spirituality' of a people refers to the animating and integrative power that constitutes the principal frame of meaning for individual and collective meanings."[51] Paris's point underscores the ways in which the African communal ethos influences African American spirituality. According to Paris,

> Because each person is an essential part of family and the larger community, each significant event in the individual's life is at one and the same time an important occasion in the life of the whole community. As the latter is affected for good or ill by the unfolding drama of the individual's life, times of happiness or grief are invariably shared by the community. . . . Contrary to the thinking of many Western peoples, this communal view of personhood does not imply the devaluation of individuality. Rather it implies that the value Africans bestow on individuals is not the primary good.[52]

Theologian Dwight N. Hopkins comments that in the spirituality of African American women there are "values of connectedness" whereby bonds are

formed "to the poor black woman herself; to her immediate community; to her broader community; and to nature." As for their connection to the immediate community, Hopkins states that African American women are committed to maintaining the close spiritual bonds they have with others. He sees this communally focused spirituality in the stories of novelist Toni Morrison, wherein women "display a resilient will to involve themselves in liberated relationships, despite the continual presence of the Thing's spirituality (that is, the evil and damning forces of gender, racial, and economic discrimination)."[53]

Archie Smith Jr., a scholar of pastoral theology and pastoral care, brings to light another facet of African American spirituality by noting its "creative responses to radical evil in the community of the faithful and in personal experience."[54] Smith emphasizes the dialectic between the individual and the communal, noting that "personal or internal spiritual experience is essential preparation for external struggle."[55] It in no way minimizes the fact that African American spirituality is "relational or communal in character."[56] Smith maintains that radical evil is a traumatizing suffering that is not only personal but also reaches throughout the community and across generations. The lingering effects of slavery and Jim Crow on African Americans are identifiable instances of radical evil. These are traumatizing historical events to which African Americans responded with a creative spirituality that could alleviate their oppression and transform their sorrow into hope. But this spirituality is not a given. In *Navigating the Deep River: Spirituality in African American Families*, Smith warns that the African American community is experiencing an emergence of "spiritual refugees."[57] These are persons who have been "rejected, traumatized, or ousted by powerful forces that operate in church and society."[58] A similar theme is found in pastoral theologian Edward Wimberly's *Relational Refugees*. Unlike Smith, however, Wimberly views such persons as relational refugees who have not been ousted but instead have decided to separate themselves from "family, community, and past generations."[59] Therefore, whether by force or by choice, these spiritual and relational refugees, because of their intense isolation, lack the necessary spiritual resources to respond creatively to the radical evil encountered in their daily lives.

As with *spirituality*, the term *gift* is a signifier that is loaded with complexities and is therefore difficult to define. Sociologist Marcel Mauss's *The Gift* examines the custom of gift exchanges in primitive societies. Mauss proposes that what was being exchanged in primitive societies was not simply economically useful objects, what he termed "the potlatch," but "everything," material and nonmaterial, in an ongoing effort to form social ties.[60] In such societies, there is an obligation to give and to receive, and failing to do either is viewed unfavorably. "To refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and communality," writes Mauss.[61]

The most-noted critique of Mauss's theory of the gift has come from philosopher Jacques Derrida, who argues that the gift is an impossibility. Derrida writes that "for there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt."[62] The gift places one in a cycle of return from which neither the giver nor recipient can escape. Sociologists Alain Caillé and Jacques Godbout critique Derrida for placing the gift strictly within an economic system and not sufficiently emphasizing that it is part of a "social system concerned with personal relationships."[63] These networks established through the gift are necessary for communal survival. However, according to Caillé and Godbout, Derrida omits this point entirely in his account of the gift. Caillé and Godbout note that in some communities, "there still remains, as the least resort, that network of interpersonal relations consolidated by the gift and mutual aid, which alone enables one to survive in a mad world."[64] Another significant feature of the gift mentioned by Caillé and Godbout is that it marks our individuality within our social networks. The gift protects us from the decaying effects of conformity and unanimity and is an essential part of one's identity. The authors caution that as modern society endeavors to replace the significance of the gift by making everything subject to production, it "aims to produce everything so that nothing will be created, nothing emerge, nothing come into the world that is not produced."[65] Unfortunately, the weakening of the gift and gift exchange also brings about the weakening of communal bonds, without which the community cannot survive. What happens, for instance, when a community no longer exchanges what I would categorize as humanizing gifts, such as recognition, forgiveness, friendship, love, and inclusion? These gifts not only improve our humanity, but they also build the kind of communal trust necessary to respond creatively to radical evil.

There is a spiritual dimension to the gift as well. In 1 Corinthians 12:7–11, the apostle Paul identifies several spiritual gifts:

> To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Thomas R. Blanton, scholar of early Christianity, considers how the gift functioned within the early church, most specifically in the letters of Paul.[66] The social context of the time is important to Blanton's argument, as it was a time,

not dissimilar to our own, during which social stratification was prevalent throughout Greco-Roman cities like Corinth. Wealth designated a person of high social status. "Wealth, especially if displayed in conspicuously stylish ways, might count more heavily than religious purity," writes biblical scholar Wayne Meeks.[67] Theologian Pheme Perkins provides the following account of the social stratification in Corinth:

> When the Corinthians met to celebrate the Lord's Supper, which took place during a meal, some people were eating well and even becoming drunk. Others, the poor members of the community, were being left out and going hungry. We know that in the society of the time a wealthy person might give a banquet in which his special friends were served good food and wine but lesser associates of the host or of his friends would be served small portions of poor food and wine.[68]

Blanton claims that Paul would have been among those designated as a poor member of the community because he was an "impoverished and homeless itinerant, [and] was accorded shame and dishonor."[69] In an attempt to invert his low social status, Paul employed a "rhetoric of inversion" to persuade the church of Corinth to believe that the gifts of the spirit are more valuable—and bestow more status—than the material things associated with honor and prestige. "The gift of the spirit," Blanton writes of Paul's rhetoric of inversion, "enables humans to perceive 'the things of God'—including the 'deep things of God.' . . . Similar knowledge of things divine is not available to those who have received only the 'spirit' of the world.'"[70] Through this inversion, Paul sought to construct a new evaluative scheme whereby the powerless in society would be empowered not by wealth but through their spiritual gifts. These gifts signified that they had a relationship and were being empowered by God. Blanton states that "[Paul] proposed a system in which the weak of the world—as he himself appeared to be—were accorded higher honors that the world's 'strong' or socio-politically dominant."[71] The weak are made strong by the gift.

REIMAGINING THE SPIRITUALITY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN MEN: THE GIFT OF ISHMAEL

A Gift Grows in the Ghetto reimagines the spiritual lives of African American men *first* by making a correlation between the modern ghetto and the biblical wilderness. Each of these locales has been designated as the abode of the outcast, that is, society's rejects. Sociologist Loic Wacquant states that a "ghetto can be characterized ideal-typically as a bounded, ethnically uniform

sociospatial formation born of the forcible relegation of a negatively typed population—such as Jews in the principalities of Renaissance Europe and African Americans in the United States . . . to a reserved territory."[72] The biblical wilderness has similar characteristics. Hebrew Bible scholar Shemaryahu Talmon remarks that "due to its remoteness from settled land and its terrifying desolation, the wilderness becomes the chosen refuge of outlaws and fugitives."[73]

The *second* necessary correlation is between the negative characterization of Black men in the American ghetto and the biblical character Ishmael in the wilderness. Sociologist Elijah Anderson observes that "living in areas of concentrated ghetto poverty, still shadowed by the legacy of slavery and second-class citizenship, too many young black men are trapped in a horrific cycle that includes active discrimination, unemployment, poverty, crime, prison and early death."[74] He adds that "people—black as well as white—necessarily avoid [the young Black male], and through their avoidance behavior teach him that he is an outsider in his own society."[75] The young Black male is an outcast who is in constant conflict with everyone. Ishmael suffered a similar fate. In Genesis 16:12 the angel of the Lord tells Hagar, regarding her son, Ishmael,

> "He shall be a wild ass of a man,
> with his hand against everyone,
> and everyone's hand against him;
> and he shall live at odds with all his kin."

Hebrew Bible scholar Gregory Mobley points out that due to Ishmael's life in the wilderness he is depicted as a "onager-man" (onagers are a race of the Asian wild ass native to northern Iran), which allows him to function narratively in the Genesis account "as the 'feral double' of the patriarch Isaac."[76]

The *third* correlation notes that although giftlessness can condemn young Black men to a life consumed by the despair of the ghetto, Ishmael's growth as a gift allowed him to creatively find new life in the wilderness. Remembering the story of Bigger Thomas is useful here, for Bigger is the model of giftlessness. In *Spiritual Empowerment in Afro-American Literature*, theologian James H. Evans Jr. argues that Bigger endeavors to be the "creator of his own destiny."[77] He has taken matters into his own hands, so to speak, but is devoid of the necessary ethical and moral compass to give his actions life-giving direction. Bigger operates solely on his own vision of the good, nothing else. Evans observes,

> As a moral agent Bigger distinguishes between good and evil based on the *breadth of his vision* [italics mine]. . . . The fundamental weakness of

> Bigger's character . . . is his failure to recognize the contingent nature of his reality, the ambiguity of his moral decisions, and the finitude of his person. Thus, the promise of historical agency is unkept. Instead of instilling hope into the life of Vera, he merely whets her sense of grief. Instead of pulling Bessie out of her unconscious oppression, he takes her life. Instead of politicizing his race, Bigger becomes the solitary rebel.[78]

Bigger desires to change his status, to become empowered in the ghetto, but he wants to do this on his own, that is, to transform himself by his own hands. Ultimately, all Bigger can do is harm himself and others in this finite act of self-creation. He is giftless.

The story of Ishmael differs in that his transformation begins in and is nourished by his relationship with God. Genesis 21:20 states that "God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow." First, Ishmael's growth as a gift functioned to protect not only himself but Hagar, his mother, in the wilderness at a time when they were vulnerable. He was a gift to Hagar. Second, in acquiring the skills of an expert bowman, Ishmael attained a new identity that radically altered his low social status. Finally, Ishmael's relationship with the God of his mother, El Roi (the God who sees me), allowed him to discover resources beyond "the breath of his vision" and therefore create a unique way of life in the wilderness.

Following this introduction, the rest of this book explores the spiritual lives of young Black men by using an interdisciplinary approach. The overall methodology for this study is the correlational method. Theologian Frederick L. Ware says that in African American theology "correlation is applied within a complex web of connections between religion and experience."[79] Ware cautions that correlation is problematic because the Black experience and, by extension, Black religion are so diverse. For instance, he states that the religious life (or lives) of African Americans includes "Roman Catholic and Orthodox conceptions of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, African-derived religions . . . eclectic spiritual traditions, Hinduism, and Buddhism," and "secular worldviews" are to be considered as well.[80] Yet despite these challenges, the value of the correlational method is affirmed by Paul Tillich, who attests that it "explains the contents of the Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence."[81] The first three chapters of this book present a series of existential questions, or problematics, concerning young Black men.

The first chapter, "'I WAS A MAN NOW': The Problematic Manhood of African American Men," interrogates the dominant images—and models—of African American manhood. There is the image of the Sambo, the dutiful slave, who would obey the slave master even to the point of harming others

within the slave community. Also emerging during this time was the image of Uncle Tom, who was equally dutiful but, as I shall argue, would not view his fellow slaves through the slave master's evaluative logic. Uncle Tom was no Sambo. To negate these negative images of African American men, the race man emerged during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, evinced in such figures as Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois, the Black messiah type. These men were models of a redeemed Black manhood, but this model also proved insufficient, for it was, in many ways, a willful parroting of white patriarchal manhood. It was, I argue, so focused on declaring, "I am a man" that it never discovered and practiced new modes of being human.

Chapter 2, "The Hero's Sorrow: A Gift Yet Unwrapped," further explores the problem of manhood by looking at the father-son relationships of Sigmund Freud and Richard Wright. Although some readers might think it odd to include Freud in a study on Black men, my reason for doing so is not that Freud developed the Oedipus-complex theory, though that is important; it is that his failed relationship with his father negatively affected his identity as a son and, by extension, his ability to hope. Freud was giftless. As the chapter will demonstrate, Freud made several attempts to create for himself a relationship whereby he could feel himself a beloved son, that is, truly cared for by someone he deemed a heroic father. But this never happened. His dear friend and later enemy Wilhelm Fliess ultimately failed to fill this role, and his own father, Jacob Freud, did not exemplify the kind of heroic manhood Freud could admire. The unfortunate result is that he felt abandoned during his greatest achievement: his visit to the Acropolis. Freud had lifted himself from the shame of his childhood in the Leopoldstadt ghetto to become a renowned theorist of the human mind, but, in the end, he still suffered from what pastoral theologian James Dittes terms the "sorrow of incompleteness."[82]

Richard Wright's experience is somewhat different from Freud's, but the end result is the same: giftlessness. His father, Nathan Wright, abandoned his family after failing to make a better life for them in Memphis, Tennessee. During their time in Memphis, however, Richard noticed that his father was changing, and not for the better. His soul was succumbing to life in the ghetto. Worst of all, Richard saw his father's situation deteriorating because of Nathan's growing sense of spiritual abandonment—Nathan wanted to be a preacher but never received a call from God. Soon after, Nathan went into spiritual ruin, an aching hopelessness that led him back to the Natchez plantation he tried to escape. This terrified his son Richard—so much so that Richard would never allow himself to feel the need for the gift of sonship. He adopted the attitude that to embrace the vulnerability of sonship would lead him to sacrifice the only thing that he could truly depend on: himself, Richard Wright.

Chapter 3, "Ghetto Grown," analyzes the crisis of the ghetto by using the scholarship of noted sociologists, such as Mitchell Duneier, Elijah Anderson, William Julius Wilson, Horace R. Cayton, and St. Clair Drake. The ghetto is not an American original. It was created in Europe to segregate the Jewish community, particularly those who were unacculturated, from the rest of society. Furthermore, the ghetto was not always a place of desolation but was perceived as a safe space, so to speak, wherein the segregated population could maintain its unique cultural heritage. The American ghetto during the early-twentieth century, due to the Great Migration that brought millions of African Americans up north from the south, changed not only the racial makeup of the ghetto but also its public image. The data provided by sociologists portray the ghetto as an utterly hopeless place, ravaged by crime, violence, and a host of other social ills. A primary characterization of the ghetto put forth by Daniel P. Moynihan and others (for instance, psychologist Kenneth B. Clark) is that it is full of disorganized families, that is, single-family households headed by Black women. The result is that Black women are the true power brokers in the ghetto, whereas Black men are weakened because they cannot assume their supposed natural mantle of authority in the home. The disorganization of the ghetto household leads Black men to assert their manhood status in other areas. The work of aforementioned sociologist Elijah Anderson details how young Black men develop an alternative way of life—the code of the street—to provide them with a sense of meaning amidst the chaos in the ghetto. Such efforts, however, do not help Black men overcome the many challenges of ghetto life.

Chapter 4, "The Wilderness: Where Our Gift Grows," shifts the focus from existential questions (or problematics) to theological answers. A guiding question for the chapter is "How does the theology of the biblical wilderness provide an answer to the existential question of the modern ghetto?" There are diverse views of the wilderness provided by biblical scholars. It is portrayed as a place of utter desolation wherein it is impossible for anything to grow as well as a place of divine encounter, a unique space where spiritual transformation occurs. Chapter 4 examines the struggles, survival, and liberation of Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness. Unfortunately, Hagar's story of survival in the wilderness remains undervalued, even within African American theology, because biblical scholars focus instead on the wilderness in the Exodus narrative. However, among Black feminist/womanist theologians, such as Delores Williams, Hagar's story details how God sees and nurtures our gifts in order to provide a means for our survival, particularly when confronted with inescapable suffering. The chapter argues that this process of gift development was contingent on God's care-*full* development of Hagar's gift—her son, Ishmael. God's recognition of and ongoing interaction with Ishmael

(e.g., "God was with the boy, and he grew up" [Gen. 21:20]) demonstrates that the wilderness environment, though hostile, will not overwhelm Hagar. She will live because God has given her a gift.

Chapter 5, "Talking about Our Gifts," argues that the gift is a theological answer to the current spiritual crisis afflicting Black men. Currently, a primary diagnosis is that the problems of Black men in the ghetto can be attributed to poor mental health. John Head, for instance, maintains that racism has led to high rates of depression among African American men. What chapter 5 suggests is that, besides mental health and other factors, another significant contributor to the crisis is the absence of an awareness of one's gift. For many young Black men in the ghetto, there is little that affirms the presence of God. Is there a way for them to know that God is with them? A theological answer is provided by examining Ishmael's initiation into manhood in the wilderness, which is marked by his acquiring expertise as a bowman, thereby providing him a new identity. Ishmael never underwent a weaning ceremony while living in the house of Abraham; thus he never had a communal ritual to affirm his transition into manhood. This must have been terrible for his self-identity. One could imagine Ishmael asking himself, "Who am I?" during the early stages of his wilderness experience. Moreover, without this ceremony, despite his age, Ishmael was still viewed as a boy. His initiation in the wilderness, however, not only gave him an identity but also provided him with the necessary skills to live in the wilderness. What would happen if African American men in the ghetto could hear Ishmael's story? Would it inspire them to discover how a relationship with God could help them find life—not just despair—in the ghetto?

Chapter 6, "Warning: God Don't Like Ugly," offers the concluding reflection regarding the commonalities between the wilderness and the ghetto, between Ishmael and young Black men. It begins with an overview of the ways in which the wilderness was viewed as a place of spiritual encounter in the African American religious tradition, which teaches that the African American religious experience is rooted in rejecting normative ways of viewing the wilderness. Therefore, one discovers in the African American literary tradition a number of works that portray a character finding refuge in environments set apart from society—sewers, cellars, subways, and so forth. An example of this is found in Richard Wright's novel *The Man Who Lived Underground*, wherein Fred Daniels, the main character, has an epiphany of self-discovery while living underground in an urban wilderness.[83] The problem with Daniels is that his experience in the underground is void of divine encounter. He discovers himself and nothing else. Daniels and those who seek refuge in wilderness settings like the underground have been taught that these are grotesque locales, ugly places that are disapproved by God. A further problem is that not just the

location but the people themselves are deemed too ugly for God to be with them. What are the intracommunal implications for persons who, within a given inner-city community, embody the very ills of the ghetto? Does such a person ever have a chance to grow as a gift in the ghetto? And if not, what is the true cause of their demise?