

Article

“Precious Lord”: Black Mother-Loss and the Roots of Modern Gospel

Maurice Wallace

Department of English, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA 22911, USA; mow5p@virginia.edu

Received: 13 March 2019; Accepted: 17 April 2019; Published: 23 April 2019



Abstract: Thomas Dorsey’s 1932 gospel song *Take My Hand, Precious Lord* is one of modern gospel music’s most canonical works. Although its composition by Dorsey in the wake of his wife’s sudden death in childbirth is a widely known oral history, the cultural implications of a wider history of health care disparities in the US leading to higher rates of black maternal and infant mortality have not been seriously considered. This article studies the history of black maternal and infant mortality in Chicago during the Great Migration as it bears on the mournful sounds of the gospel blues and its gender-inflected beginnings. The history of early gospel, I argue, was profoundly influenced by black women’s sympathetic identification with the experiences of migration and mother-loss. Nettie Dorsey’s death represents. While Thomas Dorsey is distinguished as “the father of gospel music,” Nettie Dorsey might be fruitfully imagined as the spectral “mother” of gospel in its mournful expressions of black women’s spiritual consciousness. As such, she stands in for an alternate history of modern gospel musicality, one helping African American religious and musical history see and hear better what Emily Lordi calls “black feminist resonance” in black musical production in the golden age of gospel.

Keywords: gospel music; Thomas Dorsey; Nettie Dorsey; blues; maternal death; infant mortality; hapticality

We did not know the truth or believe it when we heard it. Motherhood! What was it? We did not know or greatly care.

—W. E. B. Dubois, “The Damnation of Women”

There was a stirring, a movement of mud and dead leaves. She thought of the women at Chicken Little’s funeral. The women who shrieked over the bier and at the lip of the open grave. What she had regarded since as unbecoming behavior seemed fitting now; they were screaming at the neck of God, his giant nape, the vast back-of-the-head that he had turned on them in death. But it seemed to her now that it was not a fist-shaking grief they were keening but rather a simple obligation to say something, do something, feel something about the dead. They could not let that heart-smashing event pass unrecorded, unidentified. It was poisonous, unnatural to let the dead go with a mere whimpering, a slight murmur, a rose bouquet of good tastes . . . The body must move and throw itself about, the eyes must roll, the hands should have no peace, and the throat should release all the yearning, despair, and outrage that accompany the stupidity of loss.

—Toni Morrison, *Sula*

1. Introduction

Thomas Dorsey’s 1932 gospel song *Take My Hand, Precious Lord* is one of modern gospel music’s most enduring works. Recorded by such musical luminaries as Mahalia Jackson, Rosetta Tharpe,

The Blind Boys of Alabama, Elvis Presley and Aretha Franklin, it is one of modern gospel's founding hymns. Famously performed by Jackson at the Atlanta funeral of Martin Luther King, Jr., by Aretha Franklin at the Chicago memorial service for Jackson, and by opera diva Leontyne Price at the state funeral for President Lyndon B. Johnson, *Take My Hand, Precious Lord* (hereafter *Precious Lord*) is arguably black America's most time-honored requiem. No less an icon than Beyoncé Knowles did her part at the 2015's 57th Annual Grammy Awards to extend *Precious Lord*'s own iconic status into the hip hop age, performing it live on stage. Remarkable as it seems, the longevity of *Precious Lord* in African American cultural life and lament might have been predicted.

The history of *Precious Lord*'s inspiration in the wake of the sudden death of Dorsey's wife, Nettie, in childbirth has long been a part of the apocryphal history of black gospel since gospel's very earliest days, rare indeed is the consideration of that larger history of black maternal and infant mortality, the particular grief over which *Precious Lord* gives anguished expression, that vexes black women's material and spiritual experience until today spoken of coincidentally. Uncommon as it is, I argue that black women's religious history and the mid-century history of modern gospel are diminished except that a serious and sustained reflection on the tenacious intersectionalities of death, black motherhood, lamentation, and the racial politics of women's reproductive health care is soon brought to bear on them. The history of early gospel, specifically, could not but have been profoundly influenced by black women's sympathetic identification with the experiences of migration and mother-loss. Against the reflexiveness of gospel music's reverence for Thomas Dorsey as "the father" of that form, to imagine Nettie Dorsey as gospel's spectral "mother" instead, which is to say gospel's earliest forbear, is to offer up the possibility of an alternate history of the modern gospel sound, one helping African American religious and musical histories see and hear better what we might call, with the deepest debt to Emily Lordi, "black feminist resonance" in early and late black musical production by black women and men.¹

2. "Hear My Cry ... ": Mourning Mother-Loss

Nettie Dorsey's pregnancy had been routine up to that fateful day in late August when she entered labor. Dorsey was away in St. Louis, promoting his music by conducting a series of workshops aimed at teaching the new music to local church soloists, choirs and music directors. When her unusual or uncontrollable breathing rhythms grew too concerning to ignore, Dorsey's uncle saw Nettie to the hospital. "But when she went there on August 25 after beginning labor," Michael Harris tells us, "no beds were available" (Harris 1994, p. 217). Hours later, Nettie Dorsey, just twenty-five years old, died at home in childbirth.

Scarcely articulable was the anguish Thomas Dorsey endured at the sudden and wholly unforeseen death of his young wife who was due to deliver their first child seven years after their 1925 marriage. Many years later, Dorsey offered this poignant recounting of Nettie's passing in his own words:

Anyways, I was in a revival, and my wife was to become a mother. I went away with the feeling that ... ehh ... she'd make a lovely, lovely mother when I'd come back ... {Nettie was] well when I left home and they sent for me to come to the door. [A messenger] brought me a telegram. I took it and read it. Almost fell out. Says, "Hurry home! Your wife just died." And I don't know how you would accept that. I couldn't accept it at all. And ... ehh ... a friend of mine put me in the car. And took me right home. I got home, jumped out and ran in, to see if it was really true. And one of the girls just started crying, said "Nettie just died. Nettie just died! NETTIE JUST DIED!" and fell in the floor. The baby was left alive, but in the next two days the baby died! Now what should I do then and there? And then they tried to tell me things that would soothe—be soothing to me. But none of it's *never* been soothing to me. From that day to this day. (Nierenberg 1982)

¹ On her "black resonance," see (Lordi 2013).

Captured on film in the 1982 documentary *Say Amen, Somebody* by George T. Nierenberg, Dorsey, still brooding, recalled the tragedy fifty years on, his weathered leathery voice rising and falling, his arms orchestral in gesticulative accompaniment. No words brought any comfort, he remembered, as friends “tried to tell me things that would soothe me” (Nierenberg 1982).

Nettie Dorsey’s unexpected death must have felt like cruel irony to Thomas Dorsey whose career from 1908 to 1926 was built around the blues. An erstwhile blues and jazz pianist who had made a name for himself as a composer, arranger and band leader for blues legend Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Dorsey would experience Nettie’s death as a blues woe deeper than any he had known performing alongside Rainey as “Georgia Tom.” Struggling to cope with the single greatest tragedy of his life, Dorsey sought consolation in a more devotional sound than had ever been heard in the blues. Emblematic of the overlay of sacred text and poetics upon the sound of blues music that would come to be called ‘gospel blues’ years before gospel was its own genre, commercially speaking, *Take My Hand, Precious Lord*, perhaps gospel music’s most widely published song, was born of the unique marriage between Dorsey’s unremitting despair, traditional Christian hymnody (viz., George N. Allen’s *Maitland*), and a common blues impulse toward flattened thirds. With surprising theatricality so many years later, Dorsey narrated the affective history of *Precious Lord*’s sudden, even soothing, irruption into his swelling grief before Nierenberg’s camera.

[T]wo fellas come by—I forget their names—they were friends of mine. And ... ehh ... they were telling me about it, and I says, “I don’t know what to do, and I don’t know how to do.” And ... ahh ... —I just tried to make my little talk to the Lord, but it was wasting, I think. And ... ehh ... I called the Lord some—one thing, and one of the others said, “Noooo! That’s not his name.” Said, “Precious Lord!” I said that just sounds good. Got several amens on Precious Lord. And ladies and gentlemen, believe it or not, I started singing right then and there *Precious Lo-o-o-o-r-r-d/take my han-n-n-n-d/ Le-e-e-e-a-a-e-e-a-a-d me o-o-o-o-u-u-o-o-n-n/And let me stan-n-d/ I-I-I-I-I-I am tired/ I am weak/ I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I-I am worn ...* (Nierenberg 1982)

If Dorsey’s telling of happenings fifty years after the fact does not convey the event of *Precious Lord*’s composition plainly, Harris explains baldly in *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* that Dorsey had been at the piano fiddling at the keyboard, when, as Dorsey recalled above, he “tried to make [his] little talk to the Lord.” According to Harris, “Dorsey had no intention of composing at that moment” (Harris 1994, p. 228). Yet, the song came on forcefully, abruptly, as from beyond the beyond of the piano’s play. Put differently, one might say, after Ashon Crawley, that *Precious Lord* issued out of a sociality of black mourning that “dislodges notions of authorship and genius as individuating and productive of enlightened, bourgeois subjectivity from the capacity to create, to carry, to converge to conceal” (Crawley 2016, p. 136). In spite of Dorsey, then (and yet with him in any case), *Precious Lord* appears to have always been already in the flow of being written, composed as it was out of the brooding performance of what Crawley calls, discerningly, “nothing music,” that “ever-overflowing excessive nothingness” that Dorsey called “wasting.” At times referred to as “soft chording,” ‘padding,’ [or] ‘talk music,’” Crawley explains,

Nothing music is the connective tissue, the backgrounded sound, of [black] church services heard before and after songs, while people are giving weekly announcements, before the preacher ‘tunes up’ and after the service ends. Ask a musician, “what are you playing?” and —with a coy, shy smile—he/she will say, “nothing.” (Crawley 2016, pp. 123, 136)

“Nothing” is a particularly fitting reply to the question of what it is one has been heard playing since the playing is (rather) a performance of anticipatory *listening(-for)*. Accordingly,

... meaning is made through the inclined ear, through the anticipation, the materiality of nothing, the vibratory frequency of black thought, of the *more to come* that *has not yet arrived* ... And we hear this in the musician’s virtuosity: they uphold, they carry, they anticipate,

through the performance of “nothing” [but a searching listening]—it is not a song, it is not a melody; we might call it improvisation, though that implies a structure upon which he is building. With the playing of nothing music, there is a certain lack of attention, a sort of insouciance with which one plays, a holy nonchalance: being both fully engaged in the moment while concentration is otherwise than the music . . . (Crawley 2016, p. 136)

Dorsey was not so much playing the piano, I mean to argue, as he was listening through it, trying “to make [his] little talk with the Lord” out of other than words when abruptly what he was listening *into* (without knowing suppositionally what he was listening *for*), “the sound of the gift of [an] unconcealment” (ibid, p. 136) finds *him*: “And ladies and gentlemen, believe it or not, I started singing right then and there *Precious Lo-o-o-o-r-r-d* . . . ” As Harris writes, “In essence, Dorsey finally had given his gospel blues music a truly complementary blues text” (Harris 1994, p. 239).

If, in *Say Amen, Somebody*, an certain incoherence pertains to Dorsey’s recollection of the immaculate conception of *Precious Lord* out of “nothing,” it is surely owed to a similarly searching nothingness performed in (between) speech and silence as Dorsey “makes [his] little talk” to Nierenberg on camera, calling up again what he cannot forget (“[N]one of it’s *never* been soothing to me. From that day to this day”) about the experience of mourning as an elemental condition of black life.² To be clear, though, the mournfulness of *Precious Lord*, its low-register lament and supplication, exceeds the mere mood of it as Dorsey heard it breaking in on nothing. In *Precious Lord*, mourning follows (black) memory. Memory is its essential tinder.

Under the spell of *Precious Lord*’s composition, Thomas Dorsey, one might say, was *afflicted* by memory. Which is to say, so completely prepossessed with the fact of black dying coming, again and again, ever nearer to him that the dread of it was, in a word, crippling, reducing Dorsey, musically speaking, to nothing but (the very generativity of) “excessive nothingness.” As Dorsey sat at the piano in the wake of Nettie’s and the newborn’s passing, *Precious Lord* materialized no more out of nothing’s thin air (“I started singing right then and there . . . ”) than from the denser ethereality of memory. Memories, as James Baldwin put it, of “what happened” reconstituted in and as the gospel sound (Baldwin [1979] 2000, p. 109). In *Say Amen, Somebody*, it is, to echo Baldwin again, “what happened to him . . . and what is certainly going to happen to you” Dorsey’s singing performs (Baldwin [1979] 2000, p. 109). In the vernacular voice of Hall Montana, the main character and narrator of Baldwin’s novel *Just Above My Head* (1979), Baldwin ventriloquizes this eidetic instinct in black gospel performance:

Niggers can sing gospel as no other people can because they aren’t singing gospel—if you see what I mean. When a nigger quotes the Gospel, his is not quoting: he is telling you what happened to him today, and what is certainly going to happen to you tomorrow: it may be that it has already happened to you, and that you, poor soul, don’t know it. In which case, *Lord have mercy!* Our suffering is our bridge to one another. Everyone much cross this bridge, or die while he still lives—but this is not a political, still less, a popular apprehension. *Oh, there wasn’t no room*, sang Crunch, *no room! At the inn!* He was not singing about a road in Egypt two thousand years ago, but about his mama and his daddy and himself, and those streets are just outside, brother, just outside every door, those streets which you and I both walk and which we are going to walk until we meet. (Baldwin [1979] 2000, p. 109)

That Baldwin should imagine a nineteen-year-old gospel quartet singer, “Crunch” Hogan, singing “*Oh, there wasn’t no room . . . At the inn!*” specifically as illustrative of the eidetic particularities of black gospel (“ . . . they aren’t singing gospel . . . he is telling you what happened to him today”)

² Though Dorsey’s memory of the genesis of *Precious Lord* has the sense of an *ex nihilo* creation, Harris informs us that *Precious Lord* owes a significant debt melodically to George Nelson Allen’s 1852 hymn *Must Jesus Bear the Cross Alone* although “Dorsey seems to have begun playing *Must Jesus* in an improvisatory mode, adding his ornamentation to Allen’s song. By doing so he was already assuming compositional control . . . though his familiar blues ‘trills’ and ‘turns’” (Harris 1994, p. 237).

testifies to an acuity about the structurally and experientially disinherited condition of black life in the white West which few besides Baldwin have been apportioned in such oracular measure. For Crunch's gospel indexes, something other and more than material dispossession and the sort of rootless wandering—"constant," "desperate," and "search[ing]"—extemporized by black folks' blues, as Amiri Baraka (né Le Roi Jones) once noted in *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (Jones 1963, p. 64). It rings with rejection as well, with the indignities of everyday denials, ritualized by law, heaped upon black citizen-subjects turned away from, and forced out of, hotels, restaurants, retail establishments, public schools, white churches, movie houses, libraries, and—as Dorsey would be reminded, painfully—public hospitals.

3. What Nettie Knew: Jim Crow in the Early Hospital Age

According to Harris, Dorsey and Nettie had planned for Nettie to deliver, he wrote, "at a hospital" (Harris 1994, p. 217). Against the banality of this rather minor detail, however, lies a modern history of race and reproduction critical to understanding at once the tragedy that was to befall Nettie and the "bridge," following Baldwin, Dorsey was to cross up to and through his "telling you what happened to him today, and what is certainly going to happen to you tomorrow" in *Precious Lord*. We forget, more specifically, that before the 1930s, babies were born far more often in homes than in hospitals. It was not until the 1930s that a movement to radically improve the hygienic conditions of hospitalization, especially around women's and infants' health, rendered hospitals preferred birthing sites (Curry n.d.). For most black women living in Chicago, segregated on the South Side of the city, the cultural shift from childbirth as a domestic event to the obstetrical scientism of the hospital as a new birthing center was at best an incomplete one, stymied by a medical caste system that limited medical services for African Americans to a city-wide corps of itinerant public health nurses, medical dispensaries, and two city hospitals: Cook County Hospital and Provident Hospital.

According to medical historian Lynne Curry, "Many of Chicago's local health centers and neighborhood medical dispensaries either did not admit black patients at all or set aside a restricted number of hours for African Americans in order to keep them separated from their white clientele" (Curry 1999, p. 36). In the face of so much discrimination, the two hundred thousand black Chicagoans who migrated to the city from points south between 1910 and 1930 turned to the only two public hospitals in Chicago to welcome African American, immigrant and indigent patients. Cook County, a twenty-one-year-old, 3000-bed complex in 1932, was set on the near West Side. Provident, founded by the pioneering black clinician, Daniel Hale Williams, almost thirty years after Cook County, was a significantly smaller operation, with just "seventy-five beds" in 1932, but set conveniently on the corner of 36th and Dearborn in the city's black South Side (Matthews 1961, p. 213). Very probably, the arrangement Thomas and Nettie Dorsey made for Nettie's hospital delivery was with Provident. Living then at the home of Dorsey's uncle, Joshua, at 448 East 40th Street, Provident, was less than two miles away (Figure 1). That already, by 1915, 90% of Provident's patients were African American, that it was a few miles closer to their South Side home than Cook County, and that it "remained one of the premier black hospitals" in the nation in 1932 all recommended Provident (Gamble 1995, p. 133). With but seventy-five beds, however, Provident could hardly keep pace with the demand occasioned by the Great Relocation of black Southerners north. Though Provident aspired to become "a black medical mecca in Chicago," as one historian put it, it could not have imagined the unprecedented numbers of African Americans who would converge on the city, mecca-like, to overwhelm that dream (Gamble 1995, p. 132). By the mid-1920s, only thirty years following its heralded founding, Provident, Curry writes, "had severely deteriorated under exorbitant pressures to meet virtually all of the health care needs of Chicago's black population, which had burgeoned during the First World War. The availability of health care services for African Americans simply could not keep pace with their numbers migrating into the city" (Curry 1999, p. 147). If the Dorseys assumed that what Harris refers to as their "pre-paid arrangement" for Nettie's hospital delivery (which we may supposed to have

been planned for Provident) guaranteed a bed for Nettie there, nearby, when the time came, the young couple was sadly, tragically, in error.

STATE OF ILLINOIS ORIGINAL
Department of Public Health—Division of Vital Statistics

CORONER'S CERTIFICATE OF DEATH

Registered No. 25300 (Consecutive No.)

1. PLACE OF DEATH
County of Cook Registration 3104
City Chicago Dist. No. 3104
Street and Number, No. 448 East 40th Street St. 38 Ward 200 B
(If death occurred in a hospital or institution, give its NAME instead of street and number.)

Length of residence in city or town where death occurred 9 yrs. mos. ds. How long in U. S. if of foreign birth? yrs. mos. ds.

2. FULL NAME NETTIE DORSEY (Col)
(a) Residence: No. 448 E. 40th Street St. Ward

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS

3. SEX Female 4. COLOR OR RACE Black 5. Single, Married, Widowed, or Divorced (circle the word) Married

5a. If married, widowed, or divorced HUSBAND of Thomas A. Dorsey (or) WIFE of

6. DATE OF BIRTH (month, day, and year) October 12th, 1906

7. AGE Years 25 Months 10 Days 14 If LESS than 1 day, hrs. or min.

8. Trade, profession, or particular kind of work done, as spinner, sawyer, bookkeeper, etc. Housewife

9. Industry or business in which work was done, as silk mill, saw mill, bank, etc. At home

10. Date deceased last worked at this occupation (month and year) 8/25/32 11. Total time (years) spent in this occupation

12. BIRTHPLACE (city or town) Devereaux, Georgia (State or country)

13. NAME GUY HARPER

14. BIRTHPLACE (city or town) Devereaux Georgia (State or country)

15. MAIDEN NAME Sarah Holsey Devereaux

16. BIRTHPLACE (city or town) Devereaux Georgia (State or country)

17. INFORMANT Myrtle H. Jones (personal signature with pen and ink)
Address 29 - nohio

18. PLACE OF BURIAL, Cremation or Removal Cemetery Eastdale 19. DATE 9/30/32

Location Township, Road Dist., Village or City Cook County State Ill.

20. UNDERTAKER J. Schweich 3215
Address 3215 Michigan St. (firm name, if any)

21. DATE OF DEATH August 26th 1932 (Month) (Day) (Year)

22. I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I took charge of the remains of the deceased herein described, held an Inquest thereon and from the evidence obtained find that said deceased came to death on the date stated above and that Dis- case or injury causing Death was: Died during delivery of child, Coroner's Physician unable to determine the cause of death Undetermined.

Date of Onset or Occurrence: August 25th, 1932

Manner of injury was: Died while in child in labor.

Accidental, Suicidal or Homicidal? Undetermined

Was injury in any way related to occupation of deceased? No

If so, specify:

23. INJURY rec'd in Chicago, (City) (Village) (Township) (Road Dist.) Specify whether injury occurred in industry, in home, or in public place:

24. (Signed) Frank J. Walsh Coroner
By Leo J. Proctor Deputy Coroner
Address 500 County Bldg.
Date 9-27 1932 Telephone

25. SEP 30 1932 Filed Registrar
F. O. Address

Figure 1. Certificate of Death, No. 25300, "NETTIE DORSEY (Col)" (30 September 1932).

Whatever may have accounted for Nettie Dorsey's unavoidable home delivery, it was Jim Crow's iron-clad commitment to white social supremacy and to policies of separate and unequal health care delivery in the early hospital age that not only crippled Provident's efforts to tender "[p]roper care to the sick and the injured without regard to race, creed or color," undoubtedly filling its seventy-five beds often (if not always) but doomed black women and infants in Chicago to maternal and infant

mortality rates not less than those of the pre-hospital era (Curry 1999, p. 147).³ Unknown as it was to white Americans, black infant and maternal mortality was already a “crisis” at the start of the twentieth century. Nationally, the mortality rates of black mothers and children in this period “exceeded those of whites by as much as 50 percent; [and] recent demographic analyses have suggested that the single most important variable in predicting childhood mortality at this time was in fact race” (Curry 1999, p. 55). In Chicago, maternal mortality rates among black women were indeed higher than the national average, “a tragic state of affairs . . . attributed to the lack of high quality obstetrical care available to African Americans in Chicago,” Curry writes (Curry 1999, p. 55). Thus, the precarity of black women’s reproductive health was to become a significant aspect of the racial health care gap in Chicago and the country before 1930. It could scarcely be chance that when Dorsey and then-musical collaborator Theodore Frye introduced *Precious Lord* to the congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church less than a month after Nettie’s death, its singing (by Frye on this occasion) was met with ecstatic affirmations of black women “shouting,” erupting in intensities of mother-loss and sympathetic feeling. “The folk went wild,” Dorsey recalled. “They broke up the church. Folk were shouting everywhere” (Harris 1994, p. 241). To be sure, not all those who were moved to a shouting feeling at Ebenezer that historic Sunday morning were women—at least Dorsey does not say they were as the “folk” he remembered breaking up the church are not explicitly gendered as women here. Still, Dorsey persisted elsewhere in associating shouting as an enfleshed feeling, as “a grasping of the heart,” with women specifically. “I seen women in the audience [of blues sets] jump up, so touched . . . –*jump up like you shouting in church* [emphasis added]. I’ve seen that right in the theater.” In churches and theaters alike, women “jump up and wring and shout,” Dorsey observed (Harris 1994, p. 96).

4. Come Sunday: Early Gospel and Black Women’s Haptical Experience

If Dorsey was not specific enough about the closer association of women congregants to shouting, vernacular artist Lisa D. Cain put her memory of the gender dynamics of this indeterminate form of “social ecstasy”—indeterminant because one never knows for sure whether this shouting is “falling out, fainting, swooning and loud vocalizations” or a raging dance—in balder terms (Crawley 2017, pp. 98–99)⁴:

In addition to the Pastor, there were individuals in church I will never forget. I will always remember a lady named Cuttin Torch who would bring sticks of peppermint candy to church to give to the children after Sunday School. Cuttin Eddie Mae made the best peanut brittle that one could eat. Even the small roles were important and everyone worked together . . . The ushers wore white and were very important. They passed out fans, held the shouting women, delivered messages, directed people to their seats and took up the collection. They also administered smelling salt to women who fainted from shouting or had fallen out from grieving at a funeral. As a child watching someone shout was fascinating. The individual would get emotional, feel the spirit, throw back their arms, fling them around and people would rush to hold them. Men rarely shouted. (Cain 2011, p. 14)

Although Cain’s memory of the theater of shouting women she describes here is set far from Chicago in Canton, Mississippi, these were the kinswomen, daughters and grand-daughters, of those who made their way to Chicago in the vast exodus of the first Great Migration. To be sure, Mississippi was spectacularly represented in that flow headed north to Chicago. Chicago connected so easily to Canton by way of Jackson, Tennessee, east of Memphis, that it came to be called by

³ Between 1910 and 1920, to take one measure, the black population of Chicago grew by 148.5% as compared to the more modest 21% increase in the white population during the same period. As the numbers of black migrants moving into Chicago’s South Side were far too great for the region’s single black hospital to provide for South Side’s public health and medical care, “as late as 1946,” Curry writes, a report of the US Public Health Service allowed that “the racial health care gap” from the intervening years between WWI to WWII “had not been significantly reduced” at all (Curry 1999, p. 147).

⁴ On the indeterminacy of shouting’s performativity, see (Crawley 2017), especially pp. 108ff.

many migrants “North Mississippi.” As Isabel Wilkerson would write in *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration*, Chicago’s black belt saw “Baptist, Holiness, [and] African Methodist Episcopal churches practically transported from Mississippi and [neighboring] Arkansas” (Wilkerson 2010, p. 269). Cain’s “shouting women,” I mean to say, are not distant cousins to Dorsey’s theater-going women who “jump up like you shouting in church.” They are those women—Saturday, “touched” by the blues; Sunday, “shouting everywhere.”

Alternately “grotesque,” “awful,” even “funny,” as Dubois had written so many years earlier, and ranging in expression “from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor—the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance,” this frenzied “shouting everywhere,” far from the din of a wild, unmeaning pandemonium, is rather a fulfilment of a liberative sociality it would not be reductive to regard as according to historical black womanist impulses (DuBois [1903] 1982, p. 212).⁵ Which is to argue, more particularly, for *Precious Lord* as an acoulogical voicing of mother-loss, *Nettie’s* primarily, in sympathy to which black women’s shouting sounds forth a lament and disruption of the anti-black order of urban American flourishing, in general, and of modern reproductive health care, in particular. If, as Sydney Lewis has written in *Hospital: An Oral History of Cook County Hospital*, “the walls separating a public hospital from the street are permeable” and “the human toll taken by poverty, racism, violence and despair” are localized in the hospital (including its over-crowding⁶ which, as *Nettie Dorsey’s* example highlights, renders the permeability of the hospital walls of a class of speech not literal but more than merely symbolic), then the shouting church, insofar as shouting may be viewed in the light of black women’s everyday performance practices, is a counter public sphere of voluble dissent and creative, kinetic suffering (Lewis 1995, p. xv). At Ebenezer, in the haunted/haunting vibrato-space first established by the cantorial sensitivities of Dankmar Adler, a pioneering Jewish-American architect, for the acoustical design of the Reformed Isaiah Temple synagogue thirty-three years earlier, the shouting reaction *Dorsey’s Precious Lord* induced among those black women in attendance at the song’s September 1932

⁵ “Womanist” insofar as the range of black women’s shouting acts issue from, and are reflective of, a complex of Afro-Protestant religious sensibilities that understand faith as in keeping with a panoply of social and intellectual commitments including, especially, anti-racism, anti-sexism, black feminist thought, black women’s health, biblical and ecclesial inclusiveness, and economic justice. Black womanist theologian, Emilie Townes, approached this womanist sociality as pertaining to black women’s shouting in a 2006 verse, “they came because of the wailing”:

they came because of the wailing
the wailing of so many voices
who had a strong song
but were choking from the lack of air
they came because of the weeping
the weeping of so many tears
that came so freely
on hot but determined faces
they came because of the hoping
the hoping of the beating heart
the fighting spirit
the mother wit tongues
the dancing mind
the world in their eyes
they came because they had no choice
to form a we
that is many women strong
and growing
(Townes 2006, p. 251)

⁶ Between 1910 and 1920, to take one measure, the black population of Chicago grew by 148.5% as compared to the more modest 21% increase in the white population during the same period. As the numbers of black migrants moving into Chicago’s South Side were far too great for the region’s single black hospital to provide for South Side’s public health and medical care, “as late as 1946,” Curry writes, a report of the US Public Health Service allowed that “the racial health care gap” from the intervening years between WWI to WWII “had not been significantly reduced” at all (Curry 1999, p. 147).

introduction was at once a wailing and a “wild” non-cooperation with the forces of racial exclusion, discrimination, violence and official forms of neglect in the material world of black mother-loss. Movingly that Sunday, *Precious Lord* realized a black womanist structure of feeling, intensely and excessively sonified, that could be nothing other than that which Fred Moten and Stephano Harney have called, in a word, “hapticality, or love.”

“[T]o gather dispossessed feelings in common to create a new feel,” as Moten and Harney put it, was the gift of gospel to black people (Harney and Moten 2013, p. 97). As a “vehicle for feeling,” a “grasping of the heart,” as Dorsey himself imagined it, modern gospel emerged not so much as a distinctive musical form, genre, or repertoire of techniques as it did the general form and sound of an “insurgent feel” for/after the black modern. That feeling-for, which was also a feeling-after, at once an empathic identification (feeling-for as feeling with) and an exploratory moving-toward (feeling-after as feeling for), summoned a loud hapticality beyond Dorsey’s design or understanding. His surprise at the extraordinary power of *Precious Lord* to set the church ablaze with ecstatic feeling, and his wonder at “what they were shouting for. I was the one who should be shouting . . . or sorry” was a man’s disbelief only (Harris 1994, p. 241). Backgrounded by what was, at the time of its first singing, a very public account of the song’s tragic, though not irregular, inspiration, *Precious Lord* was always already tuned to a lower frequency of hearing than Dorsey, as the “father” of modern gospel, could have felt. Like few other gospel compositions since, *Precious Lord* could not but bear the heard memory of years of modern black mother-loss in its mournful, moaning excesses. Just as the ecstatic response to *Precious Lord* at Chicago’s Ebenezer surely contained “the dissonance of several generations of cultural conflict” over the relative immanence of God in the social world of men and women; for example, as Harris has argued (God was concerned for, not aloof from, the social conditions of the faithful, an emergent liberal theology affirmed), the hope of the singer who pleads at each stanza’s end *Take my hand . . . lead me home* just as surely brought into discordant combination the plaintive welcome of death (*Lead me on to the light*) and a middle-class dream-wish of domestic constancy (*Lead me home*).

*Precious Lord, take my hand.
Lead me on, let me stand.
I am tired, I am weak, and worn.
Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.*

*When my way grows drear,
Precious Lord, lead me near,
When my life is almost gone.
Hear my cry, hear my call.
Hold my hand, lest I fall.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.*

*When the darkness appears
And the night draws near
And the day is past and gone
At the river I stand
Guide my feet, hold my hand
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.*

Between the melancholia of “the night draw[ing] near,” that is, and the bright hopes of the many thousand migrants in search of a northern “home,” *Precious Lord* achieved an improbable agreement of feeling in any case. “There’s no sound that could equal ‘Precious Lord’; he wrote it when he was

discouraged and his spirit was broken” St. Louis gospel pioneer Willie Mae Ford Smith averred (Broughton 1985, p. 50). That first Sunday, however, the haptic power of the sound of Nettie’s brokenness—indeed, her *breaking*—in her life’s last retiring moans comingled indistinguishably with the blurred groans of one bearing life in expectant labor, all but escaped Dorsey. The shouting feeling *Precious Lord* stirred, especially in black women (who just “shout more frequently than men,” as Zora Neale Hurston first pointed out) answered to a hearing from beyond the inclusive, undivided beyond of song and audition (Hurston 1981, p. 92). It was a hearing of (a call to) feeling that could not, in the final analysis, be other than the beyond of (i.e., that *is*) hapticality.

Hapticality, the capacity to feel through others, for others to feel through you, for you to feel them feeling you . . . To feel others is unmediated, immediately social, amongst us, our thing, and even when we recompose religion, it comes from us, and even when we recompose race, we do it as race women and men . . . [T]hough refused sentiment, history and home, we feel (for) each other. (Harney and Moten 2013, p. 98)

Even if Frye was the featured soloist that haptic Sunday morning and Dorsey was down front, equally visible, accompanying him, their collaboration was, in any case, Nettie’s song. And this, in two senses. Not only do I mean to underline *Precious Lord* as a requiem to Dorsey’s personal loss—a song written in Nettie’s memory, that is, and thus, from this vantage point, *her* song—but I mean also to posit perhaps gospel’s greatest hit as a ballad conceived by Nettie’s memory (that immaterial materiality of “overflowing excessive nothingness,” recall, interrupting musically on Dorsey’s mourning) and *heard*, as it were, *in Nettie’s voice*, which is to say, heard by not a few shouting black women feeling one another feeling her as though somehow feeling Nettie singing, praying, feeling *them* in the travailing tones and testimony of *Precious Lord*. Recomposing Dorsey’s broken spirit as their own, as another, hidden class of race women, to go along with Harney and Moten, they reconstitute race within the modern liberal project of American Protestantism, broadly speaking, as to both particularize a hermeneutics of African American religious faith, already ages old, and ‘color’ the prior conditions of modern gospel’s possibility black in sound and womanist in sensibility.

All of this (not to put too fine a point to it) is to argue in the final analysis for a black feminist interpretation of the early history of modern gospel, one that backgrounds Thomas Dorsey, “the father” of the form, to Nettie Dorsey, the form’s ghostly “mother.” Seen this way, and following a course already suggestively charted by Jerma A. Jackson in *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in the Secular Age*, one not only comes to discern more clearly how, in Jackson’s words, “women became important innovators in solo gospel,” especially, “help[ing] shape the contours of gospel’s solo tradition” in the modern era, but one comes to appreciate moreover how Nettie Dorsey’s unanticipated (and yet nearly predictable) death—which is to say how the elegiac narrativization of her parturient passing (and that of Thomas Jr. mere hours later)—gave new birth, mother and child, to black religious music according to a vaguely Marian conceit (Jackson 2004, p. 4). As *Precious Lord* set about “restag[ing] death and rehears[ing] mo(ur)nin(g),” to steal a phrase from Moten about the similar work of Emmet Till’s awful post-mortem appearance in photographic form (Moten 2003, p. 196), the song’s first hearing could not help but have called up the visual poignancy of the young mother and neonate, like Madonna and child, lying together, placid and still, in the same softly billowing, lace-laden casket for all who attended the funeral at Pilgrim Baptist Church days earlier to witness (Figure 2). Against the shining maternity of the *Theotokos* (“bearer of God”) in traditional Marian iconography (Figure 3), however, an unrelenting mother-loss, brooding and funerary, “haunts” *Precious Lord* in a very specific way.



Figure 2. Nettie H. Dorsey and Thomas Dorsey Jr. still from *Say Amen Somebody* (1982).



Figure 3. Tintoretto, “Madonna and Child” (c. 1570–1572), oil on canvas.

To avow that *Precious Lord* is haunted by mother-loss is to approach a meaning and state exceeding mere metaphor. This haunted condition, which Avery Gordon has so deftly and specifically given account of in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, refers to a “language and . . . experiential modality,” she writes, for apprehending how “abusive systems of power make themselves and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposed to be over and done with” (Gordan 2008, p. xvi). Put another way, “haunting” names “an animated state in which a repressed or

unresolved social violence [makes] itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely" (Gordan 2008, p. xvi). Though it is *as if* it was Nettie singing that must have inspired so many women to shouting on hearing *Precious Lord*; it is not Nettie in herself so much as the racial circumstances of Nettie's bizarre dying, far from the help of an overfull hospital, that are haunting and trouble that song's singing with "feelings of loss, solitude, separation, indignation, poverty and illness" familiar to shouting black women in the age of Jim Crow (Marovich 2015, p. 105).

Inasmuch as the specific haunting Gordon theorizes "what's been concealed [as] very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us," then it is an insufferability toward the unspoken ongoingness of indifference to black maternal and infant mortality over time, it seems, that *Precious Lord*'s haunting is against (Gordan 2008, p. xvi). Which is to say, not altogether differently, that within, between and around its worried lines (*Precious Lord* "cries out to be sung with all the dramatic phrasing and curlicues that characterize the emotive gospel performance," one writer proclaimed) (Broughton 1985, p. 50), a tenacious grief obtains, resounding from the rafters in mother-loss, by which language, it should be clear now, I mean to evoke both the loss of black mothers to death in parturition and black mothers' experience of loss *as* mothers of sons and daughters, born and not-yet-born, to the already-ready hand of black death so proximate to black life.⁷ It hardly surprises, then, that the first disciples of modern gospel were all women: Sallie Martin, Roberta Martin, Willie Mae Ford Smith, and Mahalia Jackson. Not coincidentally were women singers "the first into the field," as Broughton puts it, carrying the social gospel that is intrinsic to the gospel sound in the blues-dark grain of their voices (Broughton 1985, p. 50).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Baldwin, James. 2000. *Just Above My Head*. New York: Delta Trade Paperbacks, ISBN 978-0385334567. First published 1979.
- Broughton, Viv. 1985. *Black Gospel: An Illustrated History of the Gospel Sound*. Dorest: Blandford Press, ISBN 978-0713715309.
- Cain, Lisa. 2011. *Art of the Spirit: The Culture of the Rural South, Self-Taught Artist Lisa Cain*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, ISBN 978-1456739058.
- Crawley, Ashon T. 2016. That There Might be Black Thought: Nothing Music and the Hammond B-3. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 16: 123–49. Available online: <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed on 12 March 2019).
- Crawley, Ashon T. 2017. *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*. New York: Fordham University Press, ISBN 978-0823274550.
- Curry, Lynne. 1999. *Modern Mothers in Heartland: Gender, Health, and Progress in Illinois*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, ISBN 978-0814250327.
- Curry, Lynne. n.d. "Birthing Practices" in Encyclopedia of Chicago. Available online: <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/139.html> (accessed on 12 March 2019).
- DuBois, W. E. B. 1982. *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: New American Library, ISBN 978-1533129864. First published 1903.
- Gamble, Vanessa Northington. 1995. *Making a Place for Ourselves: The Black Hospital Movement, 1920–1945*. New York: Oxford University Press, ISBN 978-0195078893.
- Gordan, Avery F. 2008. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, ISBN 978-0816654468.
- Harney, Stephano, and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions, ISBN 978-1-57027-267-7.

⁷ On the proximateness of black death to black life, see especially Christina Sharpe (Sharpe 2016).

- Harris, Michael. 1994. *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church*. New York: Oxford University Press, ISBN 978-0198022855.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. 1981. *The Sanctified Church*. Berkeley: Turtle Island, ISBN 978-1569247303.
- Jackson, Jerma. 2004. *Singing in my Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, ISBN 978-0-8078-5530-0.
- Jones, LeRoi. 1963. *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America*. New York: William Morrow and Company, ISBN 9778-0688184742.
- Lewis, Sydney. 1995. *Hospital: An Oral History of Cook County Hospital*. New York: The New York Press, ISBN 978-0425154526.
- Lordi, Emily. 2013. *Black Resonance: Iconic Women Singers and African American Literature*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, ISBN 978-0813562506.
- Marovich, Robert. 2015. *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, ISBN 978-0252080692.
- Matthews, Henry B. 1961. Provident Hospital—Then and Now. *Journal of the National Medical Association* 53: 209–24.
- Moten, Fred. 2003. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, ISBN 978-0816641005.
- George T. Nierenberg, . 1982, *Say Amen, Somebody*. 2001. DVD. New York: GTN Pictures.
- Sharpe, Christina. 2016. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, ISBN 978-0822362944.
- Townes, Emily. 2006. They came because of the wailing. In *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*. Edited by Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas. New York: New York University Press, ISBN 978-0814727539.
- Wilkerson, Isabella. 2010. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. New York: Random House, ISBN 978-0679763888.



© 2019 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).