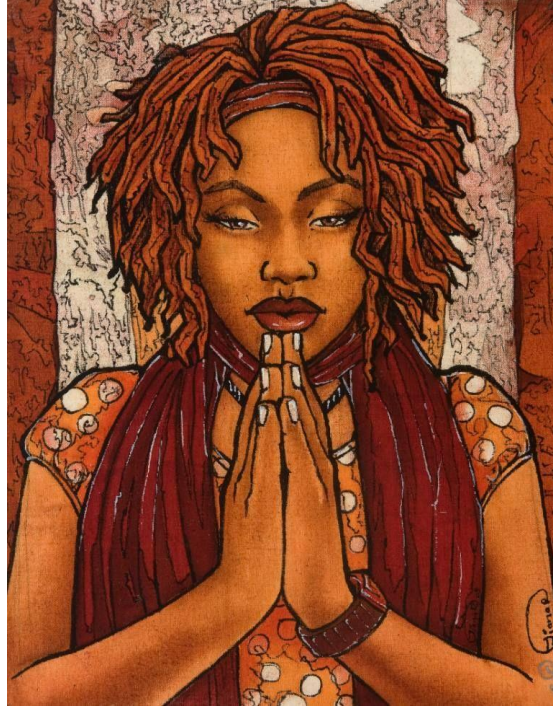


AFRC 0016 / RELS 1080

Black Spiritual Journeys

Modern African American Religious Memoir



“In Hopes of a Prayer,” self-portrait by Tiana Robinson

Course Instructor: **Prof. Vaughn Booker** (vabooker@sas.upenn.edu)

Schedule: **T 3:30PM-6:29PM OR 5:15PM-8:14PM**

Office Hours: **Zoom by appointment**

Welcome! Make sure to complete the pre-course questionnaire.

Course Overview

This first year seminar presents African Americans who have created religious and spiritual lives amid the variety of possibilities for religious belonging in the second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century. By engaging an emerging canon of memoirs, we will take seriously the writings of Black spiritual gurus, theologians, hip hop philosophers, activists, LGBTQ clergy, religious minorities, and scholars of religion as foundational for considering contemporary religious authority through popular and/or institutional forms of African American religious leadership. Themes of spiritual formation and religious belonging as a process—healing, self-making, writing, growing up, renouncing, dreaming, and liberating—characterize the religious journeys of the African American writers, thinkers, and leaders whose works we will examine. Each weekly session will also incorporate relevant audiovisual religious media, including online exhibits, documentary films, recorded sermons, tv series, performance art, and music.

Learning Objectives

This course will provide students with a scope of the religious diversity in contemporary black America. By the end of the course, students will be able to:

- Know the contemporary debates over belief and competition for belonging in African American religious life
 - Grasp the nature of black religious authority that includes, but extends beyond, church pulpits
 - Articulate black religious identities as intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, region, and profession
 - Understand African American memoirs and autobiographies as theological literature
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Required Readings

- ✚ Bean, Carl (Archbishop), *I Was Born This Way: A Gay Preacher's Journey through Gospel Music, Disco Stardom, and a Ministry in Christ* (2010)
 - ✚ Coleman, Monica A., *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman's Journey with Depression and Faith* (2016)
 - ✚ Pinn, Anthony B., *Writing God's Obituary: How a Good Methodist Became a Better Atheist* (2014)
 - ✚ The RZA, *The Tao of Wu* (2009)
 - ✚ Vanzant, Iyanla, *Interiors: A Black Woman's Healing in Progress* (1995)
 - ✚ Willis, Jan, *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist – One Woman's Spiritual Journey* (2001)
- **All** article, book chapter, and audiovisual selections listed for each meeting will be available on Canvas, through Penn Library, or provided in advance of class sessions. **You are to complete all readings before each class session, unless otherwise indicated. I will inform students beforehand of which multimedia to view before class sessions.**

[Library Privilege Policy]

Assessments

Weekly seminar meetings, reading responses, memoir essay, and a final research paper

25% for attendance and participation

25% for reading responses (1 per week)

20% for the memoir essay, **DUE TBD AT 5PM EST**

30% for the research paper, **DUE TBD AT 5PM EST**

Tuesdays (3:30pm – 6:29pm), each session is 2 hours 59 min.

Seminar Attendance and Participation

You are expected to be in attendance for every class session. Sessions will not only involve discussion of the assigned materials but also activities based on materials introduced for discussion during class time. These class sessions are enjoyable and enlightening with each student involved. **If an emergency forces you to miss class, please email me as soon as reasonably possible.**

Reading Responses

Each weekly reading response is equivalent to **at least 1 double-spaced page (300 words)** with **1-2 discussion questions**. Responses are due **each Fri. by 5pm (post to Canvas discussions)**. While responses can incorporate your experiences with each week's audiovisual and in-class materials, **they must demonstrate your thorough engagement with the assigned readings.**

The most helpful written responses accomplish some of the following things:

- Identify the main idea(s) of an author's article or chapter(s), and engage these through questions, criticisms, and/or affirmations
- Place readings/authors in critical conversation with each other (within the same week of readings or from previous weeks)
- Place the readings in conversation with the major concepts and arguments raised in lectures
- Relate your acquired knowledge (from these readings) with familiar knowledge (past coursework or relevant life experiences)

Each of your reading responses can focus on one of these tasks or even combine some of them. Overall, however, you must strive to convey your ideas and questions clearly to others through the use of proper grammar, punctuation, paragraph structure, and carefully crafted sentences. Additionally, please feel welcome to elaborate on your responses in our class sessions.

Memoir Essay

This is your opportunity to think through our seminar discussions, as well as your reading responses and discussion questions, with a **short memoir essay (5 pages) detailing your own religious/spiritual journey**. This essay should reflect what you have learned about

the details and narrative strategies that make a memoir compelling to read. Because the course does not presume any participants' faith commitments, you may choose to broaden the scope of what counts as "spiritually" significant in your life up to this point.

Research Paper

This is your opportunity to think through our seminar discussions, as well as your reading responses and discussion questions, with a culminating **research paper on an African American religious figure and their autobiographical writing**. This paper should include engagement with our required course materials, but it is also your opportunity to incorporate your own research into African American religious history and contemporary religious life. Each weekly unit header (see the Course Schedule below) provides ideas for potential areas to consider for your research, but you can be creative in this regard. To prepare your paper, you have **the following benchmark deadlines**:

- Prospectus due **TBD**
- Working bibliography due **TBD**
- Potential thesis statement + Outline due **TBD**
- Final essay due **TBD AT 5PM EST (10-12 pages)**

Please schedule an office hours meeting to discuss your approaches to this assignment.

Class Policies

Syllabus

I reserve the right to modify this syllabus and to add relevant brief discussion materials for class discussion.

Honor Principle

<https://catalog.upenn.edu/pennbook/code-of-academic-integrity/>

Sessions

As adults, we have the opportunity not only to develop our most articulate critical thinking in public spaces with these sessions—we also get to share a thinking space to help each other shape our critical/analytical voices and to learn how to take ownership of our ideas. I intend to facilitate discussion, but I also expect you to help your classmates learn and express themselves. This entails listening to the thoughts of others in class, responding to them, building on comments you find particularly engaging, and making sure everyone has the opportunity to voice her/his/their thoughts during class time.

Electronic Device Usage

For a class that helps you to become thoughtful listeners, watchers, and interpreters of African American religion through cultural production, the internet can certainly be your friend. Many relevant audiovisual materials will be available on Canvas, but you should also spend time looking up relevant materials as you come across them in our weekly readings. This will help you to comprehend an author's intricate analysis of historical materials, and it may reveal that you see or hear something that the author did not. Consequently, the use of laptops and/or tablets beyond taking notes is acceptable if it facilitates class discussion.

Email Response Policy

The best way to reach me is via email at vabooker@sas.upenn.edu. I will likely respond to emails before 9pm. Otherwise, I will respond after 9am. It is best to send questions of high importance well in advance of an essay/assignment due date to ensure a timely response.

Accessibility Policy

Please contact me as soon as possible if you require the use of accessible resources for participation in this course.

Classroom Recording Policy

The use of audio or video recording materials in this course is prohibited except in circumstances of accessibility use.

I look forward to getting to know you and learning from you this term.

Course Itinerary

WEEK 1 (Aug 27) – Introduction

- [V] Philipides, Nicholas, and Ben Schuder, *The Village of Peace* (2014) (**Hebrew Israelites**)

WEEK 2 (SEP 3)

African American Religion in History and in the Present

- Weisenfeld, Judith, "Religion in African American History," *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: American History*, March 2015, <http://americanhistory.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-24>
- Bailey, Julius H., **Ch. 6**, "[The Contemporary Scene](#)," in *Down in the Valley: An Introduction to African American Religious History* (2016), **175-224**

- Raboteau, Albert J., **Ch. 8**, "[The Conversion Experience](#)," in *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (1995), **152-165**

WEEK 3 (Sep 10)

Complex Religious Belonging

- Hucks, Tracey E., **Ch. 7**, "[‘That’s Alright...I’m a Yoruba Baptist’: Negotiating Religious Plurality and ‘Theological Openness’ in African American Yoruba Practice](#)," in *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (2012), **226-270**
- Booker, Vaughn, "[Mothers of the Movement: Evangelicalism and Religious Experience in Black Women's Activism](#)," in 'Evangelicalism: New Directions in Scholarship,' ed. Randall Balmer and Edward J. Blum, Special issue of *Religions* 12 (2), 141 (2021)
- Raboteau, Albert J., *A Sorrowful Joy: A Spiritual Journey of an African-American Man in Late Twentieth-Century America* (2002)
- **IN CLASS [V]** Visual adaptation of Langston Hughes's "Salvation" essay, in *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* (1940): [Salvation - Langston Hughes](#) (**30 MIN**)

WEEK 4 (Sep 17)

African American Buddhism I

- Willis, Jan, *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist – One Woman's Spiritual Journey* (2001), **Part I, Part II, and Part III**
- [V] Phillips, Jenny, Anne Marie Stein, and Andrew Kukura, *The Dhamma Brothers: East Meets West in the Deep South* (2010) (**Buddhism**) [**Course Media Gallery**]

WEEK 5 (Sep 24)

African American Buddhism II

- Willis, Jan, *Dreaming Me: Black, Baptist, and Buddhist – One Woman's Spiritual Journey* (2001), **Part IV and Part IV**
- [V] The Melanated Files, *Leaving America to Become a Black Buddhist Priest in Japan* (2010) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7b6um5OxWY>) (**Buddhism**)

WEEK 6 (Oct 1)

African American Religious Leadership, Song, and Sexuality I

- Bean, Carl (Archbishop), *I Was Born This Way: A Gay Preacher's Journey through Gospel Music, Disco Stardom, and a Ministry in Christ* (2010), **Prologue – Baby Boy**
- [V] *Come Sunday* (2018) [**TBD** available via Netflix] (**Unitarianism, New Thought, Religion and Sexuality**)

WEEK 7 (Oct 8)

African American Religious Leadership, Song, and Sexuality II

- Bean, Carl (Archbishop), *I Was Born This Way: A Gay Preacher's Journey through Gospel Music, Disco Stardom, and a Ministry in Christ* (2010), **Too Close To Heaven – Grace and Mercy**
- [V] Ian L. Haddock, *OutCry the Mini Documentary* (2019) (**Religion and Sexuality**) [available via [Amazon Prime](#)]

WEEK 8 (Oct 15)

New Thought Spirituality and Yoruba Religion I

- Vanzant, Iyanla, *Interiors: A Black Woman's Healing in Progress* (1995), **Part I, Part II, Part III**
- [V] Iyanla Vanzant interview/speech video TBD

****PROSPECTUS DUE TBD****

WEEK 9 (Oct 22)

New Thought Spirituality and Yoruba Religion II

- Vanzant, Iyanla, *Interiors: A Black Woman's Healing in Progress* (1995), **Part IV**
- [V] "Osun-Osogbo," *Sacred Journeys with Bruce Feiler* (2014) [<https://vimeo.com/163696391>] (**Yoruba Priestess Initiation**)

(10/25)

- ****MEMOIR ESSAY DUE****

WEEK 10 (Oct 29)

African American Theological Openness I

- The RZA, *The Tao of Wu* (2009), **Foreword – p. 99**
- [V] KRS-One, *The Temple of Hip Hop Introduction* (2018) [[KRS-One: The Temple of Hip Hop Introduction](#)] (**Hip Hop Religion**)
- [V] KRS-One, *The Temple of Hip Hop* (2015) [[KRS One - The Temple of Hip Hop](#)] (**Hip Hop Religion**)
- **RECOMMENDED** - Felicia M. Miyakawa, "[The Five Percenter 'Way of Life'](#)," in *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader*, ed. Monica R. Miller and Anthony B. Pinn (New York: Routledge, 2015), 197-212.

WEEK 11 (Nov 5)

African American Theological Openness II

- The RZA, *The Tao of Wu* (2009), **p. 100 – end**
- [V] Gayle Gilman and Jeff Swimmer, *The Church of Saint Coltrane* (1996) [<https://vimeo.com/155985592>] (**African Orthodox Christianity**)

- [V] 4:3 Feature Films, *ASHRAM: The Spiritual Community of Alice Coltrane* (2019) [[ASHRAM: The Spiritual Community of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda | 4:3 Feature Films](#)] (Vedantic Hinduism)

****WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE TBD****

WEEK 12 (Nov 12)

African American Humanism, Agnosticism, and Atheism I

- Pinn, Anthony B., *Writing God's Obituary: How a Good Methodist Became a Better Atheist* (2014), **Preface – Ch. 7**
- [V] Generation Xero Films, *Stray from the Flock: A Story of a Black Atheist* (2016) [[Stray From The Flock: Story Of A Black Atheist \[FULL MOVIE\]](#)] (African American Atheism)

WEEK 13 (Nov 19)

African American Humanism, Agnosticism, and Atheism II

- Pinn, Anthony B., *Writing God's Obituary: How a Good Methodist Became a Better Atheist* (2014), **Ch. 8 – Ch. 17**
- [V] [Film TBD] (African American Atheism)

WEEK 14 (Nov 26)

African American Religion and Mental Wellness I

- Coleman, Monica A., *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman's Journey with Depression and Faith* (2016), **Ch. 1 – Ch. 13**
- [V] Gibbons, Anika, *Journey to Liberation: The Legacy of Womanist Theology and Womanist Ethics at Union Theological Seminary* (2014) [[Journey to Liberation: The Legacy of Womanist Theology](#)] (Afro-Protestant Women Religious Leadership)

****POTENTIAL THESIS STATEMENT + OUTLINE DUE TBD****

(TBD)

- **SCHEDULED OFFICE HOURS MEETINGS DURING CLASS TIME TO DISCUSS RESEARCH PAPERS**

WEEK 15 (Dec 3)

African American Religion and Mental Wellness II and Conclusion

- Coleman, Monica A., *Bipolar Faith: A Black Woman's Journey with Depression and Faith* (2016) **Ch. 14 – Ch. 22**
- [V] Womanist Institute, *What Manner of Woman* (2012) [[What Manner Of Woman - A Short Documentary Film](#)] (Afro-Protestant Women Religious Leadership)

****FINAL RESEARCH PAPER DUE TBD AT 5PM EST****

Documentaries on Religious Journeys

- 4:3 Feature Films, *ASHRAM: The Spiritual Community of Alice Coltrane* (2019) [[ASHRAM: The Spiritual Community of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda | 4:3 Feature Films](#)] (**Vedantic Hinduism**)
- Blake, John, *Black Church, Inc.: Prophets for Profit* (2015) (**Afro-Protestant Prosperity and Prophetic Traditions**)
- Amazon, *Bishop Carlton Pearson: A Test of Faith* (2018) (**Unitarianism, New Thought, Religion and Sexuality**)
- Generation Xero Films, *Stray from the Flock: A Story of a Black Atheist* (2016) [[Stray From The Flock: Story Of A Black Atheist \[FULL MOVIE\]](#)] (**African American Atheism**)
- (**Frontiers of Learning, 2013**, <https://www.bahai.org/frontiers/>)
- Gibbons, Anika, *Journey to Liberation: The Legacy of Womanist Theology and Womanist Ethics at Union Theological Seminary* (2014) ([Journey to Liberation: The Legacy of Womanist Theology](#)) (**Afro-Protestant Women Religious Leadership**)
- Gayle Gilman and Jeff Swimmer, *The Church of Saint Coltrane* (1996) [<https://vimeo.com/155985592>] (**African Orthodox Christianity**)
- Grewal, Zareena, *By the Dawn's Early Light: Chris Jackson's Journey to Islam* (2004) (<https://religionresearch.org/closer/2017/05/05/zareena-grewal-by-the-dawns-early-light-chris-jacksons-journey-to-islam/>)
- Haddock, Ian L., *OutCry the Mini Documentary* (2019) (**Religion and Sexuality**)
- Main, Ronald G., *The Leah Daughtry Story: A Woman of Faith and Politics* (2008) (**Pentecostalism and Politics**)
- "Osun-Osogbo," *Sacred Journeys with Bruce Feiler* (2014) [<https://vimeo.com/163696391>] (**Yoruba Priestess Initiation**)
- Philipides, Nicholas, and Ben Schuder, *The Village of Peace* (2014) (**Hebrew Israelites**)
- Phillips, Jenny, Anne Marie Stein, and Andrew Kukura, *The Dhamma Brothers: East Meets West in the Deep South* (2010) (**Buddhism**)
- Time for Ilhan (2018) (**Rep. Ilhan Omar, first Muslim Somali-American US Congressmember**) [[Amazon Prime](#)]
- Willis, Mikki, *Spiritual Liberation: Fulfilling Your Soul's Potential* (2009) (**New Thought**)
- Womanist Institute, *What Manner of Woman* (2012) ([What Manner Of Woman - A Short Documentary Film](#)) (**Afro-Protestant Women Religious Leadership**)

Additional Memoirs (options for research papers) (available in Reserves)

- Abercrombie, Richard, *Crossing the Line: A Memoir of Race, Religion, and Change* (2019) (**Bahá'í**)
- Adiele, Faith, *Meeting Faith: An Inward Odyssey* (2004) (**Buddhism**)
- Arceneaux, Michael, *I Can't Date Jesus: Love, Sex, Family, Race, and Other Reasons I've Put My Faith in Beyoncé* (2018) (**Religion and Sexuality**)
- Bailey, Cornelia Walker, with Christena Bledose, *God, Dr. Buzzard, and the Bolito Man: A Saltwater Geechee Talks about Life on Sapelo Island* (2000) (**Gullah/Geechee Religion**)

- Burke, Tarana, *Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement* (2021) (**Roman Catholicism**)
- Bush, Cori, *The Forerunner: A Story of Pain and Perseverance in America* (2022) (**Independent Ministry, Activism**)
- Calhoun, Jordan, *Piccolo Is Black: A Memoir of Race, Religion, and Popular Culture* (2022) (**Seventh-Day Adventism**)
- Cotton, Dorothy F., *If Your Back's Not Bent: The Role of the Citizenship Education Program in the Civil Rights Movement* (2012) (**Nondenominational/Spiritual**)
- Edelman, Marian Wright, *Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors* (2000) (**Christianity and Judaism**)
- Gray, Ahuvah, *My Sister the Jew* (2001) (**Orthodox Judaism**)
- Green, Doris, *Don't Wait Until the Battle is Over: Shout Victory Now!* (2017) (**Prison Ministry**)
- Haddish, Tiffany, *The Last Black Unicorn* (2019) (**Ethiopian Judaism**)
- Jones, Alex, *No Price Too High: A Pentecostal Preacher Becomes Catholic* (2006) (**Roman Catholicism**)
- Knight, Gladys, *Between Each Line of Pain and Glory: My Life Story* (1997) (**Mormonism**)
- Martin, Wynetta Willis, *Black Mormon Tells Her Story: The Truth Sang Louder than My Position* (1974) (**Mormonism**)
- McSpadden, Lezley, with Lyah Beth LeFlore, *Tell the Truth and Shame the Devil: The Life, Legacy, and Love of My Son Michael Brown* (2016) (**Protestant Christianity**)
- Moore, Darnell L., *No Ashes in the Fire: Coming of Age Black and Free in America* (2018) (**Religion and Sexuality**)
- Muhammad, Ibtihaj, with Lori L. Tharps, *Proud: My Fight for an Unlikely American Dream* (2018) (**Islam**)
- Obama, Barack, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995/2004) (**Liberal Protestantism**)
- Omar, Ilhan, *This Is What America Looks Like: My Journey from Refugee to Congresswoman* (2020) (**Somali-American Islam**)
- Reese, Della, *Angels Along the Way: My Life with Help from Above* (1997) (**New Thought**)
- Tate, Sonsyrea, *Little X: Growing Up in the Nation of Islam* (1997) (**Nation of Islam**)
- Turner, Tina, *That's My Life* (2020) (**Buddhism**)
- Yelena, Khanga, *Soul to Soul: A Black Russian Jewish Woman's Search for Her Roots* (1994) (**Judaism**)
- Young, Andrew, *A Way Out Of No Way: The Spiritual Memoirs of Andrew Young* (1994) (**United Church of Christ**)

Bibliography (additional sources for your research)

Highlighted = Reserves

- Abdullah, Zain, *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem* (2010)
- Azaransky, Sarah, *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement* (2017)
- **Best, Wallace D., *Langston's Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem* (2017)**
- Bowler, Kate, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (2013)

- Cannon, Katie G., and Anthony B. Pinn, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of African American Theology* (2014)
 - Casselberry, Judith., *The Labor of Faith: Gender and Power in Black Apostolic Pentecostalism* (2017)
 - Cressler, Matthew J., *Authentically Black and Truly Catholic: The Rise of Black Catholicism in the Great Migration* (2017)
 - Curtis, Edward E., IV, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam, 1960-1975* (2006)
 - Floyd-Thomas, Juan, *The Origins of Black Humanism: Reverend Ethelred Brown and the Unitarian Church* (2008)
 - Frederick, Marla F., *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith* (2003)
 - Frederick, Marla F., *Colored Television: American Religion Gone Global* (2016)
 - Haynes, Bruce D. *The Soul of Judaism: Jews of African Descent in America* (2018)
 - Hucks, Tracey E., *Yoruba Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (2012)
 - Jackson, Jerma A., *Singing in My Soul: Black Gospel Music in a Secular Age* (2004)
 - Jackson, John L., *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem* (2013)
 - Lamore, Eric D., ed., *Reading African American Autobiography: Twenty-First-Century Contexts and Criticism* (2017)
 - Lewin, Ellen, *Filled with the Spirit: Sexuality, Gender, and Radical Inclusivity in a Black Pentecostal Church* (2018)
 - Lofton, Kathryn, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (2011)
 - Manigault-Bryant, LeRhonda S., *Talking to the Dead: Religion, Music and Lived Memory among Gullah/Geechee Women* (2014)
 - Martin, Lerone A., *Preaching on Wax: The Phonograph and the Shaping of Modern African American Religion* (2014)
 - Miller, Monica R., *Religion and Hip Hop* (2013)
 - Miller, Monica R., and Anthony B. Pinn, eds., *The Hip Hop and Religion Reader* (2015)
 - Miller, Monica R., Anthony B. Pinn, and Bernard 'Bun B' Freeman, eds., *Religion in Hip Hop: Mapping the New Terrain in the US* (2015)
 - Prentiss, Craig R., *Staging Faith: Religion and African American Theater from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II* (2013)
 - Raboteau, Albert J., *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (1995)
 - Savage, Barbara D., *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (2008)
 - Taylor, Ula Y., *The Promise of Patriarchy: Women and the Nation of Islam* (2017)
 - Tucker-Worgs, Tamelyn N., *The Black Megachurch: Theology, Gender, and the Politics of Public Engagement* (2011)
 - Turner, Richard B., *Islam in the African-American Experience*, 2nd ed. (1997/2003)
 - Weisenfeld, Judith, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (2017)
-