

Article

Mothers of the Movement: Evangelicalism and Religious Experience in Black Women's Activism

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Abstract: This article centers Black religious women's activist memoirs, including Mamie Till Mobley's *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America* (2003) and Rep. Lucia Kay McBath's *Standing Our Ground: The Triumph of Faith over Gun Violence: A Mother's Story* (2018), to refocus the narrative of American Evangelicalism and politics around Black women's authoritative narratives of religious experience, expression, mourning, and activism. These memoirs document personal transformation that surrounds racial violence against these Black women's Black sons, Emmett Till (1941–1955) and Jordan Davis (1995–2012). Their religious orientations and experiences serve to chart their pursuit of meaning and mission in the face of American brutality. Centering religious experiences spotlights a tradition of Black religious women who view their Christian salvation as authorizing an ongoing personal relationship with God. Such relationships entail God's ongoing communication with these Christian believers through signs, dreams, visions, and "chance" encounters with other people that they must interpret while relying on their knowledge of scripture. A focus on religious experience in the narratives of activist Black women helps to make significant their human conditions—the contexts that produce their co-constitutive expressions of religious and racial awakenings as they encounter anti-Black violence. In the memoirs of Till and McBath, their sons' murders produce questions about the place of God in the midst of (Black) suffering and their intuitive pursuit of God's mission for them to lead the way in redressing racial injustice.

Keywords: Mamie Till; Emmett Till; Lucia McBath; Lucy McBath; Jordan Davis; Sybrina Fulton; Trayvon Martin; civil rights; Black Lives Matter; gun violence; gun control; activism; maternal activism; Congress; Christianity; religious experience; Evangelicalism; Evangelical left; Pentecostalism; mourning; memoir

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"It is a radical act to nurture the lives of those who are not supposed to exist. Not supposed to grow old (Oscar Grant). Not supposed to speak up (Mumia). Not supposed to survive domestic violence (Marissa Alexander). Not supposed to walk across streets (Michael Brown). Not supposed to wear hoodies (Trayvon Martin). Not supposed to ask for help (Renisha McBride). Not supposed to play loud music (Jordan Davis). Not supposed to be old (Kenneth Chamberlain). Not supposed to be inside our homes (Kathryn Johnson). Not supposed to shop for toys at Walmart (John Crawford III)."

—Loretta J. Ross, Preface to *Revolutionary Mothering* (Ross 2016), p. xviii.

"A new generation of leaders ultimately would point our way. But it was their mothers who would nurture the movement. Mothers also would guide and they would lead. Too often, though, they would lead us in mourning."

—Mamie Till-Mobley, *Death of Innocence* (2003), p. 226.

"My whole body slumped in my chair as the full reality of my son's murder hit me squarely in the chest. *God show me what to do now*, I beseeched my Lord. My

child was dead. My whole purpose for waking up each morning had been torn away. How would I go on? Where would I find meaning? I had no clue. I begged God for an answer, my desolation at last absolute...I was too lost in grief and anguish to realize that through Jordan, I was already being guided to a purpose greater than any I could have dreamed for myself. It was a call to action that I would come to understand had been mine all along. God had begun planting the seeds right from the beginning..."

—Lucia Kay McBath, *Standing Our Ground* (2018), pp. 25–26.

1. Introduction

Scholarship on Evangelical Christianity in American history often reads as if it is in response to the historian Jon Butler's characterization of "jack-in-the-box" religion—namely, that there is only a focus on the moments where the social consensus locates the presence of a disruptive religious force in domestic, political, or international affairs.¹ Put differently, a focus on Evangelical Christianity appears within a highly politicized academic framework that seeks to locate reactionary social presences. The political moments in which focuses on Evangelical Christianity emerge also condition the *content* of the scholarship on the religious actors, movements, and institutions that scholars have signified as important in America's political landscape over the course of the twentieth century. An understanding of political practices determines the understanding of religious practice, and to a problematic extent, Evangelical Christianity remains heavily defined by conservative political activism. And although recent works have sought to expand what constitutes the history of Evangelical religious practices and communities, there is the persistent dilemma of understanding these religious practitioners simply by the content of their most prominent political moments and political actors.

In this article, I center Black religious women's activist memoirs, including Mamie Till Mobley's *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America* (2003) and Rep. Lucia Kay McBath's *Standing Our Ground: The Triumph of Faith over Gun Violence: A Mother's Story* (2018), to refocus the narrative of American Evangelicalism and politics around Black women's authoritative narratives of religious experience, expression, mourning, and activism. I expand upon my previous scholarship that centers African American religious activism in the historiography of Black Freedom struggles, and my previous scholarship that centers mid- and post-Civil Rights era memoirs as documents that position African American race representation according to the life experiences the (co-)authors view as formative, instructive, and pivotal.² The memoirs of Till and McBath document personal spiritual transformation that surrounds racial violence against these Black women's Black sons, Emmett Till (1941–1955) and Jordan Davis (1995–2012). The religious orientations and experiences of these two Black women, now prominent figures in Christian history, serve to chart their pursuit of meaning and mission in the face of American brutality.

One concept that illuminates the missions of these Black mothers is the "prophetic engagement" of Black Christian women that anthropologist of religion Marla Frederick has analyzed in Halifax County, NC. Frederick utilizes gratitude, empathy, and "righteous discontent" to categorize the women's spiritual motivations as they work to transform local inequality. Gratitude constituted a belief in God's protection and providence for the women, as the testimonies Frederick received in her interviews indicate.³ Empathy expressed both a relationship with God and a longstanding connection to those in the

¹ See (Butler 2004).

² See (Booker 2014; Booker 2020a; Booker 2020b; Booker 2021).

³ (Frederick 2003, pp. 65–72).

community, whether as lifetime residents or as return migrants.⁴ For Frederick, empathy leads to self-sacrifice in order to help sustain the community, relating a conception of the divine to an often overlooked “element of care” which motivates local forms of resistance to a problematic world.⁵ With righteous discontent, Frederick builds on Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham’s concept of Black women’s religious history of “challenging,” because of dissatisfaction, “the very social and economic structures that cause their distress.”⁶ Black women channel such discontent into viable public spheres, thereby representing most concretely the actual geneses and responses of social engagement. With these three lenses of interpretation, Frederick is able to construct thick descriptions for Halifax’s Black women’s public action while focusing critically on the religious motivations for their behavior.

With Black Christian women’s memoirs, I bring attention to these activists’ religious experiences for three reasons: (1) as Till and McBath pursue becoming authoritative religious voices, they view their religious experiences as the genesis of their activism; (2) as evangelical Christians, they interpret religious experiences as the assurance that not only are their deceased sons eternally with God, but also that God will comfort the survivors; and (3) as they pursue becoming authoritative voices for racial justice, they declare that religious experiences are confirmation of God’s blessing and guidance for their work. Anthropologist and urban scholar Rebecca Louise Carter’s work to define Black women’s “restorative kinship” practices is important for this second point. For Till and McBath to declare the assurance of their deceased Black sons’ eternal salvation provides “...great comfort in part because it [goes] against other determinations made by the world at large, which placed young Black men not in heaven but in jail, in hell, or somewhere in between. They were dismissed—abandoned, criminalized, incarcerated, murdered, and then killed again by the implication, tacit or not, that they got what they deserved.”⁷

Centering religious experiences points to a tradition of Black religious women who view their Christian salvation as authorizing an ongoing personal relationship with God. Such relationships entail God’s ongoing communication with these Christian believers through signs, dreams, visions, and “chance” encounters with other people that they must interpret while relying on their knowledge of scripture. For instance, Sybrina Fulton (b. 1966), the mother of Trayvon Martin (1995–2012) and member of the Missionary Baptist denomination, created the “Circle of Mothers” for women who “had lost their children to violence” after a dream she interpreted to be a sign from God:⁸

“In a dream, I saw myself in an endless field of purple.

And I saw ladies crying in agony and sorrow. They were lost and alone, even while they were somehow together. Then, suddenly, I saw them smiling and hugging one another in support. I somehow knew that these ladies were mothers. And I knew that, just like me, they were mothers who had lost their children to senseless gun violence. And while they once felt alone, they now had one another.

I saw these mothers sitting together in a circle in an enormous room. Then I saw them sitting together before tables filled with flowers, and everything was so pretty and so purple. There were different speakers coming up to speak to them. I had no clue what all of this meant. But I knew that it was a vision that God had given to me. When I awoke, I grabbed a pen and paper, and I began writing down what I had seen in my dream. And when I was done writing about that

⁴ (Frederick 2003, p. 74).

⁵ (Frederick 2003, p. 80).

⁶ (Frederick 2003, p. 94). See also (Higginbotham 1993).

⁷ (Carter 2019, p. 193).

⁸ (Circle of Mothers 2018).

purple dream in my purple bedroom, I had pages and pages of notes, all about that dream about mothers who found healing in one another.

The next morning, I knew my purpose, my mission..."⁹

Fulton's Circle of Mothers is like the Mothers Group that Carter observed in New Orleans, a form of collective practice to support and mobilize Black women who have lost family members to violence. The Mothers Group met at the Liberty Street Baptist Church and represented a gathering of Black women "united in their Christian faith and by their shared experience of the violence that persisted in New Orleans's poor Black communities." As Carter assesses, the Mothers Group is both a support resource for Black women who face significant occasions (birthdays, anniversaries, holidays) without their loved ones and a gathering "to honor their lost loved ones, claiming them as significant and valued persons—members of families and communities on earth and now in heaven. The relatedness they cultivated thus countered larger processes of social and physical death, and it moved them all, slowly, from the devastation to the sacred development of the Crescent City." For Mothers of the Movement, then, the Circle of Mothers exists within a tradition of Black women who "countered the devaluing or dismissal of 'God's children' as they developed specific practices to 'raise' the dead" through ritual, memorialization, celebration, and mission.¹⁰ And, as in the cases of Till and McBath, such groups rely on Black women sharing testimonies of loss to encourage each other to move from their anger with God toward trusting the divine to guide the rest of their lives and grant them peace and strength.¹¹

Scholar of African American religion Rosetta E. Ross has identified a history of Black religious women who appeal to religious experience for authorizing their public witness and testimony in civil rights activism.¹² Furthermore, Africana religion scholars Dianne M. Stewart and Tracey E. Hucks have advocated approaching Black religious lives with attention to phenomenological aspects: Black people's "humanity, orientation, and imagination that register subtler dimensions of their condition as human beings who, like other human beings, have to wrestle with what it means to exist, to procreate, and to secure conditions for human survival/thriving including food production; struggling against disease and unwellness; sustaining familial and kinship networks; engaging the bounty, tenuousness and inscrutability of the visible-invisible world; and dealing with death."¹³ A focus on religious experience in the narratives of activist Black women helps to make significant their human conditions—the contexts that produce their co-constitutive expressions of religious and racial awakenings as they encounter anti-Black violence.¹⁴ In the memoirs of Till and McBath, their sons' murders produce questions about the place of

⁹ (Fulton and Martin 2017, pp. 327–28). Earlier in the text, Fulton explains her purple bedroom color: "Purple is my birthstone, the purple of amethyst, the ancient stone that, it's written, Moses said was filled with the spirit of God, bestowing power and strength." (Fulton and Martin 2017, p. 67).

¹⁰ (Carter 2019, pp. 157–58). Carter engages theorist Sharon P. Holland's concept of "raising the dead" in her study of New Orleans's Black Christian women. Carter writes that to "raise" the dead is a collective response to the pain caused by violent Black deaths that includes "not only practices of mourning, or mutual support, but the *restoration* of kinship through the assertion of relatedness and worth." (Carter 2019, p. 168).

¹¹ (Carter 2019, pp. 186–88).

¹² Ross writes, "The assertion of having an encounter with God—generally understood as an internal personal experience—coincides with the Christian conception of God's spirit being active within a person. The speech of testimony (claiming experience of such an encounter through speech) and the activity of witness also affirm the concept of divine presence within people, asserting that God within a person makes a difference in what she does when she brings the God within to bear on how she interprets, understands, and relates to the world around her. Moreover, assertion of a divine presence within that inspires an external witness presupposes an internal locus of authority giving direction and courage to confront what may even seem to be insurmountable challenges, anticipating that God will 'make a way out of no way.'" See (Ross 2003, p. 224).

¹³ (Stewart-Diakité and Hucks 2013).

¹⁴ Here, I echo Judith Weisenfeld's formulation of "religio-racial" identity in (Weisenfeld 2016).

God in the midst of (Black) suffering and their intuitive pursuit of God's mission for them to lead the way in redressing racial injustice.¹⁵

2. Scholarly Overview

Before engaging the religious experiences and witness that Till and McBath bring into their public activism on behalf of their murdered sons, it is important to outline the Evangelical Christian history that has formed religious subjectivity for many African Americans. In the most general sense, Evangelicalism is a subset of Christian denominations that adhere to the principles of Biblicism (the belief in the inerrant literalism of the Judeo-Christian scriptures as they now exist), Crucicentrism (the belief that the redemptive suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus is atonement for human sinfulness), Conversionism (the belief that individuals must state clearly their belief in Jesus' salvation work for the promise of eternal life after death and that their lives must reflect biblical standards of morality), and Activism (the belief that "born-again" or converted Christians must confess this gospel to others in order to expand God's Christian kingdom on earth).¹⁶ Some scholars have argued that a hallmark of Evangelical belief is a rhetorical culture in which pronouncements of certainty, assurance, and conviction prevail—which is why it is also important to examine the lives of disenchanted Evangelicals who embrace what they perceive as the freedom not to articulate clearly their personal beliefs.¹⁷

A subset of Evangelical belief, known as fundamentalism, represents what some scholars have characterized as a politically and socially militant form of anti-modern Evangelical Protestantism. Stridently opposed to Darwinian evolutionary theory and theological modernism or liberalism—the belief in the non-literal, historical-critical reading of the Bible and the propensity towards more universal understandings of human salvation and the need for social action—fundamentalists generally have regarded themselves as the protectors of proper American culture in various eras of American decay that ultimately span the entire twentieth century. A history of (non-Holiness) American revivalism undergirds this attitude towards reforming American culture according to fundamentalist readings of scripture.¹⁸ There are five thusly-named "fundamentals" of Evangelical fundamentalism, which are also evidence of its northern religious (seminarian) origins: the virgin birth of Jesus, the substitutionary atonement of Jesus as Christ, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the reality of miracles, and the factual and scientific inerrancy of scripture. Despite their shared belief in miracles, however, fundamentalists believed that the biblical miracles associated with the New Testament narrative of Pentecost ceased after the biblical era, and they will only re-emerge with Christ's Second Coming. Consequently, fundamentalist Christians oppose the beliefs of Pentecostal and charismatic Christians, who believe and practice the laying of hands, glossolalia, and the interpretation of glossolalia.¹⁹

More broadly, Pentecostalism emerged as a result of the nineteenth-century Holiness movement and the early twentieth-century Azusa Street revivals, which not only saw the spread of glossolalic practices on the American West Coast but also what some scholars have argued is the maintenance of earlier "slave religion" African American religious practices in American Christianity, despite the opposition of Black Methodist and Baptist

¹⁵ Stewart-Diakité and Hucks point to Charles H. Long's discussion of religious experience: "The situation of the culture of black peoples in the United States afforded a religious experience of radical *otherness*, a resourceful and critical moment that allowed these communities to undertake radical internal criticisms of themselves, their situation, and the situation of the majority culture. In religious terms, this was an experience of a kind of *mysterium tremendum*, or the experience of a *deus otiosus*. 'And I couldn't hear nobody pray, O Lord / And I couldn't hear nobody pray.'" (Long 1999, p. 9).

¹⁶ See (Balmer [1989] 2014; Noll 2002).

¹⁷ See (Hempton 2008).

¹⁸ See (Marsden [1980] 2006).

¹⁹ See (Bendroth 1993).

denominations.²⁰ For each of these groups—Evangelicals, fundamentalists, Pentecostals, charismatics—there is a belief in dispensational premillennialism, which is the idea that true Christians will avoid the End-Times tribulation that is to afflict humanity before Jesus Christ’s return to earth for his millennial reign.²¹ In the latter half of the twentieth century, politically and religiously conservative activists like Jerry Falwell (1933–2007) succeeded in collapsing previously-stark distinctions between Evangelicals and fundamentalists, and the nature of post-1960s conservative politics and culture suggest a fluidity in understanding these groups (although specific Evangelical and Pentecostal denominations maintain clear definitional borders and practices).

The aforementioned “jack-in-the-box” appeal of locating and identifying American Evangelicalism rests with specific moments and practices in American history. Because of the premillennial beliefs of Evangelical Christians, they have engaged heavily in missionary work since the mid-nineteenth century to convert those they have considered religious “heathens”. Because of the importance of the biblical land of Israel in the Evangelical American worldview, they have sustained efforts to missionize Jewish immigrants since the 1880s.²² These efforts have developed to foster a focus on the state of Israel, based on the belief that it is central to divine plans for humanity. The American presence in the Middle East has also included a focus on creating the modern state of Egypt and the work of Evangelical Egyptians, which has itself produced a reaction by Egyptian Muslims who have limited Christian proselytizing.²³ Additionally, missionaries have focused on converting African Americans, Native Americans, and Chinese immigrants to normative Evangelical Christianity since the Reconstruction era.²⁴ In turn, African American denominations have taken this Evangelical missionary zeal to places like West Africa in order to expand their own denominations and to reshape a continent that Western white Christians constantly signified as devoid of genuine civilization.²⁵

In addition to the stories of Evangelical missionary presences throughout the nation and around the globe, scholars have focused on one early twentieth century political moment as the crystallization of the entire fundamentalist-as-Evangelical religious experience in America. The Tennessee Scopes Trial in the 1920s continues to represent a cultural and political moment in which William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow seemingly embody the opposing constituents of American society: religiously retrograde and rationally modern. These factions are contesting the appropriate place and character of religion, primarily thanks to H. L. Mencken’s narration of the trial itself.²⁶ Additionally, the populist rise of the “Moral Majority” in the 1970s and 1980s represents a movement that garners the most public attention on Evangelical Christianity, which allows many popular academics and intellectuals to characterize this form of Christianity as teleologically focused on conservative politics and policy. The conventional narrative posits a conservative religious gulf between the Scopes trial of the 1920s and the emergence of the Religious Right in the 1970s, led by prominent fundamentalist Christian pastors who began to unite the disparate (Evangelical, fundamentalist, Pentecostal, charismatic) groups. These religious leaders then mobilized a churchgoing white American public against the social evils of abortion, homosexuality, and evolutionary theory while also galvanizing the efforts to “bring back” prayer into America’s public schools.²⁷ The constant specter of premillennial

²⁰ See (Stephens 2010).

²¹ See (Sutton 2014).

²² See (Ariel 2000).

²³ See (Sharkey 2008).

²⁴ See (Chang 2010).

²⁵ See (Williams 1982).

²⁶ See (Larson 1997).

²⁷ See (Harding 2001).

missionary zeal, the opposition to evolution, and the rise of conservative political alignment with the Republican Party have all generated familiar touchstones for narrating the history of Evangelicalism in America in this manner.

3. Alternative Scholarly Trajectories

If the goal of American Evangelical scholarship is to move beyond simply one politicized portrait of its religious subjects, then there are relevant historical works to add some pretext and context to the discussions of the usual flashpoints for discussing either Christian fundamentalism in particular or American Evangelicalism more broadly. Some scholars have attempted to understand the nineteenth-century roots of the Evangelical, Tennessean culture that focused squarely on the teaching of evolutionary theory in public schools. There is a history of southern Evangelical Christians who sought moral reforms in society, laying claim specifically to public schools as agents of social and moral cultivation for white American children. Consequently, there existed a focus on the proper place and educational culture of public schools in Tennessee (which was able to generate public support and mobilization) well before the issue of teaching evolutionary theory emerged as a problem in the early twentieth century.²⁸

Despite popular conceptions, the years between the Scopes Trial and the emergence of the Moral Majority were not some sort of “retreat” from national politics. There existed the presence of what some scholars have termed an Evangelical “subculture” of educational institutions like the Moody Bible Institute, Fuller Theological Seminary, the growth of conservative Christian campus ministries, and networks of print literature in book and magazine publishing that established a healthy national religious presence for American Evangelicalism. This subculture fostered religious networks that would prove useful for later political battles.²⁹ Additionally, the development of phonograph preachers and broadcast radio technology, both publicly and privately-funded, existed as media through which white and Black Evangelical and fundamentalist ministers created national networks to promote unified social and political causes, develop cultures of religious music, and to vocalize deeply influential rhetorical stylings—performances which translated to political talk shows and later televangelism as well.³⁰

Studies that examine the emergence of a West Coast conservative Evangelical politics, alongside national patterns of industrialization and deindustrialization, have also highlighted the longstanding discursive networks and national religious communities that make the “emergence” of the Religious Right less surprising in retrospect.³¹ Additionally, this (de)industrialization story accompanies the shift of massive federal works projects and funding from urban, northern centers to the American sunbelt. Here, the emergence of a “Christian free enterprise” culture renders a primarily consumer-centered, service-oriented professional industry religiously palatable to a generation of Americans who had previously found professional purpose in plant/factory jobs which were ceasing to exist.³² Lastly, media projects that focus on cultural renderings of Israel and Hebrew biblical characters in film and television in the mid-twentieth century continue to reflect the domestic salience of premillennial visions of American military involvement in the Middle East. Religious media provides a sense of how more than a century of Evangelical missions has powerfully shaped the nation’s sense of itself domestically and its role abroad as protector of holy lands. The writings and televangelical works of Timothy and Beverly LaHaye (most notably, the *Left Behind* series) represent a popular production of premillennial interest.³³

²⁸ See (Israel 2004).

²⁹ See (Carpenter 1997).

³⁰ See (Hangen 2002; Martin 2014). A more recent study of Evangelical media and popular gospel music is (R. P. Harper 2017).

³¹ See (Dochuk 2011).

³² See (Moreton 2010).

³³ See (McAlister 2001).

The framework of American political history looms large over the study of American Evangelical Christianity. The works of Dochuk, Moreton, and McAlister meaningfully expand our understandings of Evangelicalism and fundamentalism to incorporate the tools and lenses of social and cultural histories. Nevertheless, specific historical benchmarks condition the study of Evangelicalism as perpetually a political phenomenon at its core, with attention to religious meaning making that is virtually secondary. Put simply, a focus on the significance of different racial and gendered subjects (i.e., to look beyond white males) in American Evangelicalism is necessary. What is difficult is imagining the appropriate historical approach to broadening the story of Evangelicalism beyond those most effective civic participants throughout the twentieth century and into the early years of the twenty-first century. Both Harding and Dochuk nod to the complicated relationship between African American Protestants and conservative white Evangelicals. Harding points out Jerry Falwell's purported transition from segregationist to integrationist and to his appeal to the moral conservatism of Black Christians. And Dochuk identifies a few key Black preachers who allied with many Sunbelt conservative Evangelicals in the post-Civil Rights era, including those who were representative of most African American Christians who opposed the nonviolent resistance protest tactics of African Americans involved in the movement. Nevertheless, a political story still dominates.

Charles Marsh's earlier study of several conservative religious figures during the modern Civil Rights movement, across the racial divide, does much work to depict a (Southern) American religious landscape of theological commonalities contesting with stark political differences. The difficulty, however, is that Marsh writes as a scholar invested in Evangelical religious reconciliation between Black and white Christians (which is not necessarily a problem in itself, but it does raise questions about his narrative strategies and methodologies for historians of American religion who wish to provide even more complex portraits).³⁴ R. Marie Griffith's ethnographic exploration of the Women's Aglow religious fellowship provides fascinating insight into the practices of charismatic white Evangelical women who seek to establish themselves as leaders and resources for others in women's religious communities as they operate within scripts of their "submission" to masculine authority.³⁵ Additionally, LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant's ethnographic study of Gullah-Geechee Christian women provides a robust portrait of Lowcountry Black existence with acute attention to the religious experiences that define their cultural practices.³⁶ The challenge moving forward is to what extent historians of American religion are able to adopt the model of ethnographic immersion that the work of Griffith and Manigault-Bryant demands in order to fully appreciate and render justly the lives and practices of religious subjects in history.³⁷

Further studies of Holiness-Pentecostalism in American history will provide better avenues for comprehending American Evangelicalism beyond the political stories of conservative white male fundamentalists.³⁸ Classic and recent studies of Aimee Semple McPherson's Angelus Temple and her ministry in the 1920s and 1930s provide a rich portrait of a charismatic woman minister, nurtured in a Canadian Evangelical home, who combined dramatic performance and stagecraft in a preaching ministry attuned to discourses of American moral decline and reform, social uplift, and military jingoism. McPherson also represented the historical precursor to popular televangelists like Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts, and Paul and Jan Crouch of the Trinity Broadcasting Network.³⁹ Studies of African American congregations and denominations like the

³⁴ See (Marsh 2008).

³⁵ See (Griffith 1997).

³⁶ See (Manigault-Bryant 2014).

³⁷ Another anthropological and psychological approach to Evangelical religious experience is (Luhrmann 2012).

³⁸ For a study that centers Pentecostal material religion, see (Blanton 2015).

³⁹ See (Blumhofer 1993; Sutton 2007).

Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ of the Apostolic Faith, conservative Black Christian voices in the civil rights movement, the role that church mothers have played in the religious lives of working-class African Americans, and the global dimensions of Black televangelism present meaningful steps toward incorporating conservative African American theologies and practices into discussion with white Evangelical and Pentecostal communities.⁴⁰ Lastly, the neo-Pentecostal phenomenon has strongly shaped post-Civil Rights era African American religious culture, resulting in modern megachurches populating the American South, the Sunbelt, and the mid-Atlantic East Coast. This direction provides the most fruitful ground for understanding the emergence of a dominant religious culture that is not punctuated by the political histories of fights over evolutionary theory, public schools, Republican party politics, the longstanding history of overseas missionary works, and a strong tie to the state of Israel (although there are several ways to incorporate African American religious perspectives on all of these issues). The degree and historical timeline of various racial groups' incorporation into American society, including Latin American, Korean, and African immigrant Evangelicals, certainly challenges the political timeline by which scholars understand American Evangelical history.

An expanded conception of the race(s) of American Evangelicalism, as well as its gendered leadership, interracial dynamics, and political activism, exists robustly in scholarship that analyzes the emergence and consolidation of Jim Crow regionally.⁴¹ Continuing this scholarly thrust into the mid-twentieth century and beyond will enrich a body of scholarship that will certainly adjust to the ongoing geographical shifts of Christianities around the globe in the twenty-first century.

In what follows, I center two Black women activists whose memoirs reveal their authoritative religious discourses. Mamie Till (with a Pentecostal upbringing) and Lucia McBath (with an infrequent church-attending Lutheranism in youth, and an increased Evangelical commitment with motherhood) point studies of Evangelicalism to a focus on the long Black Freedom Struggle in America that takes seriously the religious beliefs, motivations, and expressions of Black women. Their Evangelical rhetoric does not voice dispensational premillennialism; their missionary zeal is to convert citizens to oppose white supremacy and racial violence as sins against God's divine order; and their activist witness directly counters Evangelical Christian alliances with American political conservatism. Moreover, they challenge the rendering of their work as fundamentally non-religious progressive political activism. In these ways, Till and McBath join Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977) as prominent Black Christian activists who experienced racial violence in America.⁴² By directly challenging white Evangelical Christians in America through their authoritative religious witness, they center claims that Christianity must fundamentally lead to mobilizing for racial justice.

4. Mothers of the Movement

4.1. Mamie Till-Mobley

"God told me, 'I have taken one from you, but I will give you thousands.' The words just came to me, quietly. Words of great comfort to me. A revelation can be like that. Not always like the thunder we hear in movie versions of the Bible. But more quietly, like a whisper. It's just there in your awareness, as if it had been there all along, waiting for just the right circumstances for you to notice."

—Mamie Till-Mobley, *Death of Innocence* (2003), p. 231.

⁴⁰ See (Sanders 1996; Best 2006; Butler 2007; White 2012; Frederick 2016; Casselberry 2017; Martin 2018; Chism 2019).

⁴¹ See (Harvey 1997, 2005; Bennett 2005; M. Harper 2016; Mathews 2017; Jemison 2020; Turner 2020).

⁴² See (Brooks 2014, 2020).

Mamie Elizabeth Till-Mobley (1921–2003) described the brutal encounter with the murder of her son, Emmett Louis Till, upon retrieving and examining his mutilated remains. Till presents saturated discourses of her own ready receptiveness to spirit, and her narrative testifies to a sense of religious experience filling her encounter with her son, Bo's remains. She published *Death of Innocence: The Story of the Hate Crime that Changed America* in 2003 with co-author Christopher Benson. Before encountering the body, Till described how she and her mother, Alma Carthan (later Alma Spearman), reacted to the news of his death while they were at the Argo Temple COGIC, with the language of spiritual transference. She wrote, "I looked at Mama, and she was in even worse condition than I was. I moved over to try to comfort her. Other people started doing the same thing. And then I began to feel something, like a transfer of strength. It was coming from her to me. I was afraid at that moment of what might be happening, that I might draw too much from her. Oh, God, I couldn't lose Mama. I moved back and I told everybody else to move back, to give her room, to give her air. People cried and prayed."⁴³ Here, Till indicated a spiritual connection she shared with her mother, who helped found the Argo Temple. As she detailed later in the memoir, "In a way, what I was feeling was an awareness that I would have to stay composed under the most difficult circumstances I would ever experience. What I felt was God moving through Mama and me. There was a great calm...Mama had helped me realize so much in the way she lived her life and showed me how to stay calm with the deep understanding, the knowledge that all things are possible with God. And all the rest? Just details."⁴⁴ In the time between learning of her son's death and retrieving and identifying the body, communal comfort accompanied sustained, and sustaining, prayer practices for Till: "I had to face it and I wondered if I would have the strength to get through it. I prayed for the strength, and I prayed for the courage. I prayed hard. I was staying with my mother. There were so many people around during those days while we waited for word on Bo. It must have been the sheer energy from all of them that sustained me in that time. I seemed to be drawing on it, as I had begun to draw on my mother's strength when we got the news about Bo."⁴⁵ Reflecting in this manner, Till instructed religious activists that prayer remained a reliable, spiritually fortifying practice to brace for a dreadful encounter.

But in the immediate aftermath of Emmett's murder, Till talked to groups of activists with a testimony of encounter that spoke of negative religious experience, of a numinous encounter with the *unholy* upon viewing her son's body. At Bethel AME Church in Baltimore, MD on 29 October 1955, on a speaking tour that she coordinated with the NAACP, Till recounted her horrific religious experience: "When I got up to that casket, and looked over in there, something happened to me that is akin to getting religion. I have seen people shout. I have seen them jerk. I have seen them lose control of themselves and be very happy. And then again I have seen them very sad. / But it hit me from the head and the feet at the same time. And it met in the middle and straightened me up. I looked at my arms because it felt that every bone had turned to steel. I wanted to know was the change physical, was it noticeable. Then after examining myself, I looked in the casket again, and I said, 'Oh my God!'"⁴⁶ Her encounter was "akin to getting religion," or becoming struck with the awareness and often possession of the Holy Spirit that manifests in charismatic exuberance for Holiness-Pentecostal Christians. In this case, Till described becoming transfixed by a harrowing transcendent reality, one that arrested her body and made her lose control through a stiffness she had never experienced before, not "happy" dancing or shouting. In *Death of Innocence*, she recalled the experience as "like an electric shock. In

⁴³ (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 127).

⁴⁴ (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, pp. 235–36).

⁴⁵ (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 128).

⁴⁶ (Bradley 2006, p. 136).

fact, it was terror. I felt it through every bone in my body. I stiffened.”⁴⁷ Till conveyed that her exclamation was not a use of the Lord’s name in vain, but an appeal to the divine to strengthen her: “I had to keep calling on Him in order to stand there.”⁴⁸

“We’re taught to describe things by comparison,” reflected Till in her memoir nearly fifty years after the murder. “Something we’ve seen, something we’ve done. But what did we have to compare to Emmett? Nothing in our experience. Nothing in our expression. The English language is so rich with contributions from so many other languages around the world, yet it was inadequate for us when we needed it the most. We just did not have the vocabulary to describe the horror we saw, or the dread we felt in seeing it. Emmett’s murderers had devised a form of brutality that not only was beyond measure, it was beyond words.”⁴⁹ Till expressed that she remained unable to capture through adequate language the ineffable unholy which she encountered in that violent moment. Language failed to provide a word to make sense of this encounter with a *wholly* unholy other.

On the day of the funeral, 6 September 1955, prayer was Till’s expressed desire as she stood before Emmett’s casket: “People were trying to comfort me and keep the large crowd back to give me air. I wanted to pray. / The ministers helped me to my knees. ‘Lord, take my soul,’ I began, ‘show me what you want me to do, and make me able to do it.’ / Everything, everyone, the entire yard, fell silent.”⁵⁰ Here, Till frames her authority as the bereaved mother and the prayer warrior, one who seeks the divine’s control of her being, clear guidance for what she must do next, and the strength to realize that mission.

As Till later relayed to the Bethel AME Church crowd, Willie Reed, the African American sharecropper who witnessed Emmett’s murder, testified that “[h]e heard a voice screaming. He heard a boy crying for his life, calling for his mother and calling on God. He heard him begging for mercy and he heard the blows that were being struck on the body.”⁵¹ In her memoir, she reflected both personal regret and divine absence: “At some point during his ordeal, in the last moments of his precious little life, Emmett must have cried out. Two names. ‘God’ and ‘Mama.’ And no one answered the call.”⁵² Till cast off the assumption that she simply accepted Emmett’s murder as part of God’s plan; she recalled that she did not hide her anger with God as she remained committed to praying: “I had prayed for answers and when they didn’t come right away, I became angry. I became angry with God. Why had this happened to Emmett? Why had this happened to me?”⁵³ In line with her evangelical faith, she assured readers that her son died within the Christian fold. She recalled the funeral remarks of Bennie Goodwin, Jr., the son of Argo Temple’s pastor Bennie E. Goodwin, Sr., and she asserted that her son must have exuded a faithful calmness upon his apprehension:⁵⁴ “[Bennie Jr.] remembered his encounter with Emmett on that streetcar from Argo one Sunday night, when they prayed together, when

⁴⁷ (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 134).

⁴⁸ (Bradley 2006, p. 137).

⁴⁹ (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 142).

⁵⁰ (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 132).

⁵¹ (Bradley 2006, pp. 142–43).

⁵² (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 137).

⁵³ (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 138). A similar experience and religious response by a Black mother in the early twenty-first-century is Carter’s description of Candace, an African American Baptist woman who lost her son Corey to street violence. Candace went through a period of anger with God, mourning that induced physical illness, and a gradual return to church life because of counseling, pastoral care, and a strong support group. Candace attributed her resolve to “[n]obody but the grace of God,” the result of a spirituality beyond institutional religious life, and her ongoing work to heal entailed working for justice and social transformation: “She fought for gun control, she worked in the criminal justice system, she supported crime victims and their families, she performed outreach services for women and their children, she accompanied people to court and to prisons for restorative justice programs. This work, so helpful for others, was not separate from her own recovery. ‘It’s been good for me, too’ she said. ‘It really has.’” (Carter 2019, p. 96).

⁵⁴ (Bishop Bennie E. Goodwin 1993).

Emmett accepted Jesus Christ, when my son had the most incredible aura. Emmett was so calm, at peace, as he was when those men took him away..."⁵⁵ The pastor's son was a witness to Emmett's sincere Christianity, evidence for Till that her son's soul was not lost despite the violence his body suffered.⁵⁶

In her memoir, Till offered an instructive presentation of one's spiritual orientation when seeking a divine message. Assured of her son's Christian salvation, she continued listening to the funeral remarks while remaining spiritually receptive to religious experiences in that moment:

"There came a point, in the middle of everything, as I was listening to the speakers, when I had a sensation. It was something I could just barely make out. Something fluttering somewhere. It seemed like it was in the corner of my eye, at the edge of my awareness. As my eye darted to get a better look and as my head turned to follow, the image seemed to move, just ahead of my glance, always just a flutter ahead like that, always on the borderline between conscious and subconscious. It would happen like that over and over again. And it looked like a dove. I wanted to see it fully, but never could. It would always move away just when I'd turn my full attention to it. I came to realize that it was a sign. The dove. A sign of peace. A sign from God."⁵⁷

Till attuned herself to seek out any possible manifestation God's presence, comfort, and assurance for her mission. With heightened senses, she testifies to perceiving visualizations of spiritual presence and to a gift of interpreting those symbols as God's unspoken favor over her life, her son, the sacred space where thousands viewed Emmett's remains, and her mission to pursue peace against racial violence.

In the aftermath, Till began traveling to raise awareness of modern American lynchings of Black boys and men. As she made meaning of her circumstance, she expressed her awakened state of activism against Jim Crow terror and segregation: "I have invested a son in freedom and I'm determined that his death isn't in vain." As Till reasoned, Emmett had become a martyr for African American civil rights. She presented a religious narrative of her son's blameless sacrifice for a God-ordained Black Freedom struggle: "When I was talking to God and pleading with Him and asking why did You let it be my boy, it was as if He spoke to me and said:—'Without the shedding of innocent blood, no cause is won.' And I turned around then and thanked God that He felt that I was worthy to have a son that was worthy to die for such a worthy cause."⁵⁸ Through Emmett's innocent sacrifice and Mamie's authoritative witness, God enlisted the Till family, mother and son, to lead God's people in the middle of the twentieth century.

Till's civil rights awakening was a religious awakening as well. As she told the Bethel AME Church crowd, "Pray for me, pray for your organization and above all, don't forget

⁵⁵ (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, pp. 142–43). Till described Bennie, Jr. as "a student at the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago and the choir director at Argo Temple. He also ministered to the boys in the neighborhood through a church-sponsored boys' club." In this prayer encounter that Bennie, Jr. recalled with Emmett, Till describes their meeting as a divinely-orchestrated encounter: "At a certain point, he asked if Emmett wanted to pray with him. Emmett said he would and they prayed together on the streetcar. Bennie says that when Emmett raised his head, he looked transformed. It was that moment...when Emmett accepted Jesus Christ. Bennie would remember that experience for years to come, because he realized that the reason he had not been able to concentrate on his studies was because he was being interrupted by something much more important. It was, as he recalls, the voice of God." (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 93).

⁵⁶ Earlier in the memoir, Till stated her hope that Emmett would follow his relatives' examples and join the ministry: "We had a lot of ministers on my father's side. I always thought Emmett would make a wonderful preacher. I thought he might at least become a deacon or a trustee in somebody's church. He liked going to church and he was under the influence of his grandmother, a deeply religious woman. He talked about helping her build a church one day. He attended the one she had helped to build, the Argo Temple Church of God in Christ." (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 78).

⁵⁷ (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 144).

⁵⁸ (Bradley 2006, pp. 139–40).

the NAACP.”⁵⁹ Her charge involved exposing the “cotton curtain in Mississippi that must have a steel lining” in a Cold War era where Americans focused on the Iron Curtain in Europe. “[I]f the white man and the black man fight one another day in and day out[,] [f]oreign powers won’t have to come over here to destroy us,” Till warned. “We’ll just stand here and disintegrate.” Her decision to allow the world to view her son’s mutilated body subverted the usual course of action that suppressed knowledge of modern lynchings in the American south.⁶⁰ She recognized that Willie Reed’s inability to deliver a full testimony that withstood cross-examination resulted from a segregated education system: “That’s why you are going to have to integrate those schools and make it possible for those children to talk and know what they see and be able to tell it.”⁶¹

Trained to found COGIC churches by her mother, who had founded at least five congregations in the North, Till became one of the seven founding members of the Evangelistic Crusaders Church of God in Christ in 1973 (where she served as church secretary and Sunday school teacher). She became known as Mother Mobley when the denomination’s Church Mothers’ Board made her a member.⁶² Till remained an educator until her death, committing to “training boys and girls to do Dr. King’s speeches.” She considered it one of her many public responsibilities to be a resource to other Black mothers whose son’s deaths indicated murder, like Maria Johnson, mother of Raynard Johnson, the seventeen-year-old Black boy who was found hanging from a pecan tree in Kokomo, Mississippi in 2000.⁶³ In her final public appearance in 2002, she embraced nonviolence because she believed “the Lord spoke to me, and he told me not to spend my time hating the perpetrators of the crime because they would not even know that I was hating them.”⁶⁴ Vengeance belonged to God, who she claimed had punished Milam and Bryant in their lifetimes,⁶⁵ and she professed no desire for their deaths. Instead, her life’s work, which included activism and education, was a social, political, and Evangelical calling to take others “along to higher heights and deeper depths in knowledge and in the fear of God.”⁶⁶

⁵⁹ (Bradley 2006, p. 145).

⁶⁰ (Bradley 2006, pp. 133–36).

⁶¹ (Bradley 2006, p. 143).

⁶² (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 242).

⁶³ On empathizing and comforting Maria Johnson, Till wrote, “I knew what she was feeling during this time, a time when even all the family love, all the public support couldn’t fill that hollow loneliness. I felt that, too. So deeply. We talked about that feeling. About that and the need for her to find peace within herself and with God. She had to accept God’s will even if she didn’t fully understand it right away. That was the first thing to do. Once she could reach that peace, she would receive spiritual guidance to handle everything else that she would have to handle: finding the truth, finding forgiveness. She would have to be strong to endure what lay ahead: the outside pressure, the inner turmoil. Oh, I knew these parts so well. I could see how difficult it was going to be.” (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 276).

⁶⁴ Till spoke of a recurring dream that she eventually interpreted to be a message of God delivering her from hatred: “...I heard a voice in this dream. ‘I have suspended you high above the troubled waters. Keep moving forward. You are headed in the right direction.’ / When I awakened from the dream, I had such a sense of peace. I knew that the troubled waters had been hatred and God had guided me over it and away from it. I would not take that plunge, and I was so thankful. Hatred is a self-inflicted wound. And it is so destructive. I never felt any hatred for Bryant and Milam. And I didn’t want them to be executed. I wanted justice. I wanted them to be sorry. I wanted the state of Mississippi to be sorry. I want it still.” (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 262).

⁶⁵ In her memoir, Till presumed Milam and Bryant faced eternal damnation: “...But as horrible a crime as they committed against my little boy, against me, against society, their true crime was against God. They were given enough time to redeem themselves, to show remorse, to beg forgiveness. And it seems that they refused to do it. As I taught my kids, life is all about choices. Bryant and Milam made a terrible choice, the most expensive one of their lives. It cost them their eternal souls. I feel so very sorry for them. In this world, they only had Mamie to deal with.” (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, p. 262).

⁶⁶ Till declared, “[S]omething was spoken to me and that something was, ‘I am the ruler of heaven and earth I see all things. I’m commissioning you to go into the vineyard and work, and what is right I will pay. And don’t forget that vengeance is mine.’” On Bryant’s lack of “confessed repentance,” Till stated, “I felt sorry for him that he did not have a spiritual life, and I just wonder where he thought he was going to spend eternity or if he thought he was going to be here forever. Because there’s one sentence that you cannot escape, and that is when you go before the judgment seat of God, he will give the verdict.” “Mamie Till Speaks

Mamie Till-Mobley's memoir may provide a model for illuminating readings of Black evangelical Christian women, especially activists and organizers, as they foreground religious and spiritual discourse in explaining their motivation and advocacy. To contest popular conceptions that the Movement for Black Lives lacks religious participation and/or leadership, the involvement and leadership of Black women and men, as Black scholars (and mothers) have observed, establishes the thorough presence of spiritual and religious activists who work for justice.⁶⁷ Additionally, there are other memoirs of the twenty-first century movement's mothers that reveal their spiritual journeys and/or religious identities, including *Tell the Truth & Shame the Devil: The Life, Legacy, and Love of My Son Michael Brown* (2016) by Lezley McSpadden with Lyah Beth LeFlore; *Rest in Power: The Enduring Life of Trayvon Martin* (2017) by Sybrina Fulton and Tracy Martin; and *This Stops Today: Eric Garner's Mother Seeks Justice after Losing Her Son* (2018) by Gwen Carr with Dave Smitherman. This article now centers Lucia Kay McBath's memoir because she positions herself as an authoritative Evangelical voice for justice and transforming white Evangelical attitudes toward gun usage in "Stand Your Ground"⁶⁸ legal contexts.

4.2. Lucia Kay McBath

"Perhaps the most extraordinary part of my journey has been watching my life be transformed in the wake of Jordan's death, being called out of the boat, stepping out on the water for a cause. Just as God did with Abraham, he said to me, *I am going to take you to a land where you've never been. You won't know anybody at first, you won't know how to do what I am asking of you, but I just need you to go. I will guide your steps.*

I know in every cell of my body that my son came into this world to make a difference, and in the end, he helped deliver me to my highest calling. His death showed me that I am to be a voice in the wilderness, joining a dynamic group of activists who are working to stem a red tide of violence, one fueled by the deadly interplay of guns, race, politics, and faith in American life. I have no doubt this

of Forgiveness #BLACKLIVESMATTER (Last Public Appearance Before Passing)," YouTube, 2 September 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Q3ZOCjkEwY> (accessed on 31 December 2020).

⁶⁷ Leah Gunning Francis's study of the religious presences in the Ferguson uprising, a response to Michael Brown's killing, reveals progressive Christian clergy in activist movements from "day one," in her analysis, regardless of the visible movement leadership's (non-)religious identities and affiliations. Gunning Francis, a Womanist theologian, seminary professor, former pastor, and mother, articulates the connection between her religious identity and activist commitment: "As a woman of faith, I did not separate my actions in pursuit of justice for Michael Brown from my faith. Instead, I understood them as an expression of my faith. My faith, or my belief and trust in God, motivated me to join the efforts to seek justice and provide care. My faith was integral to my works, and, together, enabled me to embody my idea of faithfulness in this time of communal distress." She describes the "Mother's March" that she organized with pastors Karen Anderson, Traci Blackmon, and Rebecca Ragland that gathered Ferguson's mothers on 18 October 2014. This organizing moment was "to call for justice on behalf of Michael Brown, and call for an end to all violence in our city," with violence including "all killings of our children at the hands of police, people claiming 'stand your ground' justifications, or peers." (Francis 2015, pp. 3, 128).

⁶⁸ The Episcopal priest and Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas provided an historical overview and critical assessment of Stand Your Ground laws for Black Christian audiences who pursued activism in the wake of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown's murders. Douglas writes, "The Stand Your Ground law is an extension of English Common Law that gives a person the right to protect his or her 'castle.' Stand Your Ground law essentially broadens the notion of castle to include one's body. It permits certain individuals to protect their embodied castle whenever and wherever they feel threatened. Essentially, a person's body is his or her castle. In this regard, a person does not have to retreat from the place in which he or she is 'castled'; they can stand their ground. While this law was initially invoked as a reason for Trayvon's slaying, it was not used as a formal defense. Nevertheless, Stand Your Ground law signals a social-cultural climate that makes the destruction and death of black bodies inevitable and even permissible. It is this very climate that also sustains the Prison Industrial Complex, which thrives on black male bodies. Most disturbing, this stand-your-ground climate seems only to have intensified as it continues to take young black lives such as those of Renisha McBride, Jonathan Ferrell, and Jordan Davis. The repeated slaying of innocent black bodies makes it clear that there is an urgent need for soul searching within this nation." (Douglas 2015, p. xiii).

is my divinely-appointed purpose, but when tragedy arrived at my door in a sudden senseless burst of gunfire, I thought I had failed my child. I believed my life was over. And perhaps it was. But a new life opened up before me, and there was nothing else for me to do but claim it. In telling my story—and honoring the life of the child God entrusted to me—I am claiming it still.”

—Lucia Kay McBath, *Standing Our Ground* (2018), p. 8.

Till’s church-planting mother was largely responsible for dissuading her daughter from becoming a full-time activist and organizer following her son’s murder. In Till’s estimation, her mother appeared to fear losing both her grandson and daughter to Jim Crow’s violence.⁶⁹ Having lost her son, Jordan Russell Davis, because Michael David Dunn murdered him, Lucia McBath (b. 1960) chose to leave her job as a flight attendant to pursue a transformation in America’s social and religious attitudes towards gun ownership and gun legislation.

Focusing on Africana women’s maternal activism, scholar Erica S. Lawson’s analysis of “maternal grief” reveals that “Lucia McBath expresses herself as a bereaved, politicized maternal subject who still believes in the ‘American Dream’ and the promise of the American ideal, in large part, because of few options to do otherwise. She claims motherhood as a way to challenge problematic tropes about Black mothers, she speaks against the discursive representation of the single Black mother who is thought to raise irresponsible children, and she describes her son as a young man with a bright future.” Like Mamie Till, “It was important for McBath to reclaim her son as a typical American middle-class teenager in the context of discourses that seek to justify the deaths of young Black men for real or fabricated acts of crime.”⁷⁰

Lawson’s assessment came before the completion of McBath’s 2018 memoir, *Standing Our Ground: The Triumph of Faith over Gun Violence*, which she co-wrote with Rosemarie Robotham. McBath echoes several Black Evangelical Christian themes present in Till’s memoir: discourses of grief that lead to healing, religious experiences in funeral ceremonies, theodicies for the murder of Black boys that assure both divine guidance and an earthly calling for the mother, and the tough responsibility to forgive the killer. McBath recalled her childhood in Joliet, Illinois and her parents’ activism (her father, Lucien Hamilton Holman, was a dentist and NAACP activist). Civil rights activism was hallowed family business, especially when organizing in response to King’s assassination: “The people who gathered around our dining table to plan marches and boycotts were all part of Dr. King’s righteous army. I was part of his army. From the time we could walk, my sister and I had marched alongside our parents in the baking sun.”⁷¹ McBath’s mother, Wilma Cecelia Holman, had a Lutheran upbringing in upstate New York, and she took McBath and her sister “sporadically” to a local Lutheran church where they “were usually the only black family in the pews.” Infrequent church attendance, due to Joliet’s racial dynamics, meant that McBath’s early religious instruction and prayer life occurred primarily within their home.⁷² McBath writes, “I found my way back to the church through some of our fellow African American families” while she was raising Jordan in middle-class Douglasville, GA, upon seeking a Christian private education for her son. Attending Wednesday evening Bible study at Light and Salvation Outreach church in Douglasville made McBath feel, in her words “as if I had at last returned to my Christian faith, which I had practiced somewhat intermittently in the years before Jordan was born.”⁷³

Echoing the charismatic beliefs Till expressed, which bore the imprint of her Holiness-Pentecostalism, is McBath’s belief that she experienced healing through prayer and

⁶⁹ (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003, pp. 256–57).

⁷⁰ (Lawson 2018).

⁷¹ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 31).

⁷² (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 39).

⁷³ (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 70–71).

the laying of hands. McBath is determined to present her Evangelical bona fides to a conservative white Christian readership and audience who will oppose her stance on “Stand Your Ground” laws and interpretations of the 2nd Amendment: she works alongside prominent pro-life activist Rev. Rob Schenck (b. 1958); she cites the Christian blogger Chris Williams, who writes for *Patheos*; she promotes the activism to address gun violence and Black/Brown mass incarceration of Rev. Michael McBride, pastor of the Way Christian Center in Berkeley, CA and director of the Live Free Campaign; and she extols her fellow “Mother of the Movement,” Geneva Reed-Veal, the mother of Sandra Bland (1987–2015) “who didn’t need a teleprompter or a script to raise the Holy Ghost. When Geneva stepped up to speak, it was church.”⁷⁴ Additionally, in her September 2020 virtual town hall with then-Georgia Senate candidate and pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, Rev. Raphael Warnock (b. 1969), McBath states that she listens regularly to Charles Stanley (b. 1932), the prominent Southern Baptist megachurch pastor and televangelist who founded In Touch Ministries.⁷⁵ What McBath’s *Standing Our Ground* adds to understandings of Black Christian women’s activism in response to white supremacist systems and violence is a conversation that positions Christianity against white conservative Evangelicalism, which she argues represents the entanglement of white supremacy, capitalism, and gun violence.

McBath is a Black Evangelical Christian who expressed her belief that charismatic gifts of healing through prayer and the laying of hands were real. She recounted a religious experience at a Wednesday evening service following her breast cancer diagnosis:

“...[A]ll the worshippers in attendance had circled me in prayer. They laid hands on me, and spoke in tongues. Then Yvette Maynard, who was a breast cancer survivor herself, placed her palm against my left breast, over my heart and toward my shoulder where I had told her the calcifications had been found. At her touch, a wave of heat shot through my entire body, and I started convulsing and retching, but nothing came up. I knelt there, gasping and shuddering as the people around me prayed. Suddenly, a sensation like a cold whoosh flooded through me, like cool brook water running through my veins, chasing the heat, and I felt cleansed and spiritually whole inside, and I knew I had been healed.”

Two weeks later, when the ultrasound technician could not locate cancerous masses on her, McBath replied, “I’ve been healed by God.”⁷⁶

McBath named her son Jordan after the biblical river, declaring, “...I was bestowing upon him the promise of those stones from the river—asking God to love and protect my child, and deliver him to his life’s greater purpose, his own Promised Land.” She remained assured that Jordan’s life was in service of God’s work: “I think deep down in his spirit Jordan always knew that God had a special assignment for him. But it would be years before I grasped an even greater truth—that, whether or not we choose to accept it, God holds special assignments for us all.”⁷⁷ She stated her belief that Jordan would “grow up to be a social activist” based on how he demonstrated leadership within his social group,

⁷⁴ (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 196–98, 200, 209, 214–15).

⁷⁵ McBath stated, “I walk my dog every morning, and I’m praying to God as I’m walking my dog. I’m on a number of prayer text chains, there are people that I pray with, there’s meditationals that I’m reading and scripture that I read every single day. I listen to Charles Stanley every single day. Because I know that these are some very very difficult times, and I view everything that’s happening here as a spiritual battle, I really really do, so that is the way I tackle it. I’m always calling on God asking for his wisdom and his strength and guidance that I’m not making decisions that are against his will....What gives me hope is that each and every day I can get up and I can follow the path that God has given me. And I really pray that I’m keeping my vision expanded and open to what he’s calling me to do for his people.” “LIVE Town Hall with Congresswoman Lucy McBath and Reverend Raphael Warnock,” 18 September 2020, *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IbkrAvP-pyc> (accessed on 7 January 2021).

⁷⁶ (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 78–79).

⁷⁷ (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 52–53).

hoping he would follow Jesus's message to serve "the least of these" in Matthew 25:35–40.⁷⁸ When his life was cut short, she prayed privately at his memorial service, "*Lord, please carry me now. I need you more than ever before. Thank you for giving Jordan to me for seventeen precious years. Mothering him has been the best thing I have ever done. What a blessing and honor it has been to be his mother. Take good care of him, Lord. And show me what I am to do now. Show me why you have taken my child from me. I don't want his death to be in vain.*" Like Till, such a prayer came with McBath's anger at God's seeming silence as she waited for a response: "*Why Jordan, Lord? What did we ever do to deserve this sorrow?*"⁷⁹ Despite her expressed anger, McBath "didn't for a moment think [God] was punishing me. I knew by then that God didn't work that way. More likely, Jordan had been given his earthly assignment before he was ever born. I understand now that Jordan was never truly mine; he was a gift from God, entrusted to me only for a time."⁸⁰

McBath's Evangelical memoir brings issues of discrimination to the attention of her readership. She recounts the implicit biases Jordan faced in parochial schooling and quotes sociologists on presumptions of African Americans' biological and moral inferiority—which presumably connects to their penchant for violence, laziness, aloofness, poverty, and (non-modern) religiosity.⁸¹ McBath lamented, "In a Christian school, this state of affairs was especially disheartening, because hadn't Jesus asked us, above all, to love our neighbors?"⁸² She describes attending Evangelical churches, including Light and Salvation Outreach, where she was overlooked for lay church roles due to her divorced status. These experiences led her to attend the more "diverse" congregation of Trinity Chapel Church of God.⁸³ She noted the "rural white nationalists and Christian Evangelicals [who] flocked to gun shows in warehouses bigger than a football field, buying weapons by the millions" in response to President Barack Obama's 2008 election, relying on what she labeled "a globalized fear of 'the other'," including Black and brown folks, that is profitable for the gun industry and its lobby.⁸⁴

After Jordan's killing, McBath engaged scholarship on the history of lethal self-defense and relayed its messages to her readership. She framed the NRA as employing the image of Black and brown folks as "menacing" in order "to stoke ancient hostilities in white nationalists opposed to the so-called browning of America, and righteous fervor in the political entity known as the Christian Right, people who, while not always religious, were convinced they had the Word of God on their side. These mostly rural conservatives were persuaded to stockpile guns in a bid to protect and preserve their God-given freedoms."⁸⁵ Although she testified that "white Evangelical audiences tend to harbor a deep strain of racial prejudice, one that my very presence in their minds tends to expose," she remained optimistically committed to engaging them "to bridge the cultural and spiritual divide in our country" through her pursuit of common ground on gun safety measures.⁸⁶

⁷⁸ (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 102–3).

⁷⁹ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 140).

⁸⁰ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 171).

⁸¹ (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 64–65).

⁸² (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 67).

⁸³ (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 70–75).

⁸⁴ McBath adds, "'Trust God, but not man,' say many evangelicals who insist their gun rights are being threatened. They give a knowing smirk as they pat their firearms. This is usually code for a rampant distrust of those who, in their view, are not like them, the black and brown people, the criminals, illegals, and terrorists, the inner-city poor, and all those whom the NRA's leaders aggressively and repetitively warn will be coming for the 'good' Americans' homes and families. It turns out that instilling a globalized fear of 'the other' has been a wildly successful marketing plot for the NRA. Using dog whistle racial language such as the words *urban*, *animals*, and *thugs*—while also hammering home the notion of *we* and *they*—the organization's leadership has inflamed ancient hatreds buried deep in America's heart." (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 96–97).

⁸⁵ (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 137–38).

⁸⁶ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 204).

Nevertheless, she concludes her memoir with a clear position against the industry that the NRA represents: “I have come to realize that for the gun lobby, issues of race, politics, and faith are exploited only as they serve the overarching profit motive. Capitalism is the true driver of gun violence in America. With full understanding of this, I have vowed that I will not rest until this truth is received in every corner, and if I manage to save just one life by my advocacy...my work will not be in vain.”⁸⁷

McBath reveals that, during his last summer, she spoke with Jordan about “God and faith, the purpose of human suffering, heaven and the afterlife,” in addition to “the racial subjugation of black people to justify the inhumanity of slavery, and the nation’s continued oppression through such caste systems as Jim Crow and the unequal treatment of black and brown people in the criminal justice system.”⁸⁸ The conversations McBath had with Jordan over Trayvon Martin’s killing shaped his perspective on his own mortality, in light of this prospect for young Black men. She relays her conviction that God spoke to her through Jordan of his own impending death—he rebuffed his mother when she told him he would “live a long, fruitful life” by stating, “You *don’t* know what God has in store for me. You have no idea what God has in store for us...But I know one thing: when my time comes, I’ll be ready to go, because I know where I’m going.”⁸⁹ There was an inextricable link between McBath’s religious discourses with her son and the racialized realities for him, with mother presenting Evangelical discourses of God’s intimate guidance over his life, and with son presenting Evangelical assurances of his salvation no matter how long he might live.⁹⁰

Meetings were never chance for McBath—“pure serendipity” in life was “another way of saying it was orchestrated by God.”⁹¹ Here, she connects with an American religious and spiritual tradition that encompasses Evangelicals and twentieth-century metaphysicals, who regard all coincidence as divine messaging, whether verbalized, created with mental images, heard through music, or literally “inspired” thinking.⁹² It was on such a serendipitous trip to St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York city where McBath recalled a pivotal religious experience. Standing in front of the altar, she had an emotional reaction that was distinct from her grief, which “felt as if something bitter and hard inside me was being dissolved, as if I was being cleansed by my tears. I thought I heard the whisper of the Holy Spirit, and I struggled to quiet my sobs in order to tune in more closely. The idea that filled me was that God wanted me to forgive the man who had taken the life of my son.” After “tuning in” to understand the Holy Spirit’s message more precisely, and then becoming “filled” with a revelatory “idea,” she told God she would try to forgive Dunn. Next, she recalled witnessing the sanctuary becoming resplendent with light and feeling “not fragmented and lost, but *found*.”⁹³

Similar to Till, McBath expressed no hatred toward Dunn at his sentencing: “I choose to forgive you, Mr. Dunn, for taking my son’s life. I choose to release the seeds of bitterness and anger that would not honor my son’s life. I choose to walk in the freedom of knowing

⁸⁷ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 219).

⁸⁸ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 124). For scholarship on literary approaches to Black suffering in African American religious history, see (Hardy 2003; Pinn 2002).

⁸⁹ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 127).

⁹⁰ In her memoir, and in subsequent interviews, McBath stated that she and Jordan’s father Ron believed their son had premonitions of his death. (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 126–27). As McBath told Brittany Jones-Cooper, “I believe in the innermost part of my being that my son knew, he didn’t know what would happen, but I really believe that he knew that he wasn’t always meant to be here.” See “Lucia Kay McBath Chats ‘Standing Our Ground: The Triumph of Faith Over Gun Violence—A Mother’s Story,’ 12 September 2018, *Build*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAPzGnYst9s> (accessed on 2 July 2020).

⁹¹ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 150).

⁹² See (Bender 2010).

⁹³ (McBath and Robotham 2018, pp. 151–52).

God's justice has been served...I pray that God has mercy on your soul."⁹⁴ When she met with six of the jurors who found Dunn guilty, she learned that they "not only prayed before the trial, they also prayed before they deliberated, and they prayed again after they had all agreed on the verdict. But what touched me the most was that they also prayed for us." McBath states that she "left that meeting...full of wonder at the hand of the Lord. Only God could have put together that devout group of people, who petitioned him at every step to help them reach a verdict that was just...God was in that courtroom, and in that jury room." McBath interpreted the jurors' prayers as a sign of their evangelical piety, and this disclosure strengthened her claim that God "was stirring my own heart to become a crusader in the cause. It was as if he were saying to me: *I have ensured earthly justice for my beloved child, Jordan. I have carried you across the water. And now I need you to step out of the boat and help me care for the rest of my beloved children.*"⁹⁵

Before her congressional career, McBath's mission entailed holding "hundreds of conversations with white Evangelicals about the moral instruction of Jesus Christ and how it might inform our beliefs and behaviors around guns." Her proof texts included I Corinthians 6:19–20, Psalm 82:4, I Samuel 17:47, and Hebrews 11:1. For McBath, the Christian life requires "a deeply pacifist perspective, a submission of self that is antithetical to the American way" because it views "God [as] our ultimate protector". Practicing this belief in God "can liberate ourselves from the fear that our fellow citizens, though different from us, might threaten our very existence." Adherence to the Christian gospel means a rejection of carrying a concealed weapon. Consequently, McBath argues that Americans do not follow biblical teachings and, instead, "walk through the world feeling the lethal power of the gun on our hip more than the supremacy of God in our hearts."⁹⁶

As one of the fruits of her conversations, the 2015 documentary *The Armor of Light* represents McBath as the pivotal Evangelical Christian with experiential and spiritual authority to justify Rob Schenck, the prominent white Evangelical minister and anti-abortion activist, as he moves away from, and becomes an activist against, the Evangelical embrace of the 2nd amendment and the politics of the NRA. Throughout the documentary, Schenck often appears in gatherings where he argues with groups of white male Evangelical Christians, including church pastors. By contrast, his attendance at Antioch Baptist Church presents a group of Black Christian interlocutors whose racialized experiences with American policing, gun ownership culture, and Stand Your Ground laws mark their opposition to white Evangelical stances on guns. McBath claims divine guidance for a mission that follows her son's murder, and the documentary positions her to offer Schenck and the viewers words of conviction on her own moral and civil rights journey into legislative politics.

"I just pray to God. I just let him tell me what to say," proclaims McBath before the documentary shows the first meeting between Schenck and her. She tells Schenck, "It's by God's grace that I'm able to do this. I know that, unequivocally, without a doubt." Schenck explicitly introduces McBath's faith to his (presumably conservative Evangelical) audience with the coy statement, "I suspected that you were a person of Christian faith." McBath's response indicates her belief in ongoing, personal revelations due to her prayerful communication with God: "The Lord has said to me, 'They must see my face, and they must turn back to me.' And he had specifically said to me, 'I will open doors for you, I will take you places where you've never been, because they need to see my face.'"

⁹⁴ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 190).

⁹⁵ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 193). McBath articulated her divine calling "to help save lives" through the work of "agitating tirelessly for stronger gun regulations. I was to march in the streets and stand in rooms and on stages across the country, talking to people about the dangers of bad gun laws like Stand Your Ground. I was to open their eyes to the loopholes in background check laws and the dangers of assault weapons, and encourage people of faith to put their trust in God's protection, rather than in their sidearm. The latter stance would bring me into direct contact with white Christian evangelicals, who despite being fervently pro-life when it came to a woman's right to choose, tended to view any attempt to regulate firearms—which claim thirty-three thousand American lives each year—as trampling on their fundamental freedoms." (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 196).

⁹⁶ (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 200).

To see God's face means that Americans must confront their perception that a physical weapon is more effective than divine protection: "We are deceived into believing," claims McBath, "that we are so powerful because we have something that will protect me. Instead of looking to God, righteously, as the protector, we have replaced God with our guns as the protector." The teachings of Jesus Christ stood at odds with the principles of Stand Your Ground laws as Americans practiced them in the moment and claimed them in their defense:

"Jesus never advocated violence. Despite how bad it gets, we're never to advocate violence, ever. Particularly with the Stand Your Ground law—you do everything you possibly can to retreat before you use that violence. Yes, you have a right to protect yourself. But you don't have a right—God did not give you the right just to shoot to kill because you think that you're threatened? Or because you're empowered because you have a gun? That's not the will of God."

Schenck responded to McBath's religious ethics regarding the use of lethal force: "You err on the side of preserving life, which is why I'm pro-life." The documentary cuts away at this point to a solo interview with McBath, where she declares,

"I don't condone abortion, but I would never infringe upon a woman's right to choose for herself what is best for her. But I don't think it would be difficult for me to work with anyone such as Rob Schenck that is so pro-life, simply because I understand that pro-life is what I'm fighting for. A love for life. That's what this is all about, fighting for life. That's what Jesus wanted us to do. That's the whole reason why we're here."⁹⁷

McBath makes her identity as a pro-choice, anti-firearm, Evangelical Christian transparent to the documentary audience. (Other similar distinctions came in her 2018 memoir, wherein she wrote of "the energy of the divine feminine and all those who stand in its life" which represented the 2017 Women's March for Human Rights in Washington, D. C. that she attended with the other Mothers of the Movement;⁹⁸ and in May 2019 and January 2021, where she expressed her LGBTQ allyship while speaking with the Human Rights Campaign, because the LGBTQ-rights organization endorsed her 2018 and 2020 congressional campaigns.⁹⁹) And lastly, she maintains her posture of moral authority when she encourages Schenck to embrace her firearms politics: "And I know it's going to be hard for you, and I know that there may be people that don't follow you anymore because of the stand that you take. But isn't it far better to stand before God and know that you've done everything in your power to do what you know in your heart is right?" In McBath's final words to Schenck for the documentary, she likens her commitment to transforming America's conscience to her Christian faith: "I may never see the change, you know, but that's ok, that's just like believing in God even though I've never seen him."¹⁰⁰

5. Conclusions

"The convictions of Renisha's and Jordan's killers, while certainly a just end in these cases, is not the full justice that Michael's mother or the others' mothers demand. This is not the justice for which mothers weep. Theirs is a justice that goes beyond the conviction of their children's killers. They weep for divine justice. God's justice means an end to the very culture that has declared war on

⁹⁷ (*The Armor of Light* 2015).

⁹⁸ McBath writes, "Perhaps the energy of the [Trump presidential] inauguration day had been so heavy and murky, that to balance it, the world spontaneously chose brilliance, chose hope and optimism, chose to harness the energy of the divine feminine and all those who stand in its light. I believe we were all searching for a way to turn our dismay at the tone of the new administration into something positive and powerful. And we did." (McBath and Robotham 2018, p. 220).

⁹⁹ (Rep. Lucy McBath Speaks at the 2019 HRC Atlanta Dinner 2019; U.S. Representative Lucy McBath speaks at HRC's LGBTQ Inaugural Event 2021).

¹⁰⁰ (*The Armor of Light* 2015).

innocent, young black bodies. This means an end to the systemic, structural, and discursive sin of Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism, which makes black bodies the target of war.”

—Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground* (2015), pp. 231–32.

“There are women in communities all over this country and around the globe, I’m sure, like my mother. I have met some of them. Women with original and powerful ways of understanding life, ways that come from the struggles and pleasures of their lived experience, but that may not find much expression beyond their kitchen tables, their market stalls, or the crises in which their families inevitably turn to them for guidance. (Like Mamie Till-Mobley said, ‘Any trouble I’ve ever had in my life, it took Mama to get me out.’)”

—Rachel Elizabeth Harding, *Remnants* (2015), p. xi.

“As a Christian nation, as a nation of faith, we have lost our way. When people that even consider themselves Christians can use violence as a means to act out their fears, we have lost our way. If we are a nation that is founded ‘one nation under God,’ where is the God in the systemic violence that is played out every single day across the nation? That is not what God advocates. God does not advocate that violence begets violence. We cannot continue to live in fear, and fear is of the enemy. That is not of God.”¹⁰¹

—Lucia Kay McBath, “Armed in America: Faith and Guns” (2016)

McBath won reelection to her Marietta, GA congressional seat on November 3, 2020. In the preface to the November 2020 paperback edition of *Standing Our Ground* (now simply subtitled *A Mother’s Story*), McBath memorialized her Georgia congressional colleague, civil rights activist John Lewis (1940–2020), for his charge to work toward America’s redemption: “John Lewis understood that we must all be redeemers now, for there is still more work to do. And so, as one of God’s emissaries, I will continue to go where I am directed with a faithful heart.”¹⁰² In line with mid-twentieth century civil rights activism, McBath engages in interfaith work with local religious leaders, including acts of solidarity with Marietta’s Jewish community against anti-Semitism alongside Unitarian Universalist, Unity Church, Latter-day Saints, and Muslim clergy.¹⁰³ As she continues to advocate gun safety reforms, and as she challenges Christians who advocate for expanded gun ownership to live up to her scriptural interpretation of Christian nonviolence, McBath reinforces her sense of calling to political leadership (as servant leadership) with the refrain that God gave her son prescience about his fate to strengthen him and her for their life journeys:

“I draw back on those moments and those conversations that I had with Jordan all the time, especially when there are the really difficult moments when I feel like I might not understand my way, where I’m going. Or I might have a sense of ambiguity or anxiety about what I’m called to do, what God is calling me to as he continues to expand my territory and grow me and what he’s calling me to do for his people. So, I go back to those conversations because my son was the perfect example of just strength and courage in those moments. And that’s what I have to draw on as my role gets bigger, as my work expands. And I understand how important it is that I really care for the people that God has given me charge over.”¹⁰⁴

Black women, and Black mothers, are at the center of the histories of Christianity and Black Freedom activism in America. The shared life experiences and religious experiences

¹⁰¹ (McBath 2016).

¹⁰² (McBath and Robotham 2020, p. xi).

¹⁰³ (Parker 2020).

¹⁰⁴ (Uncorked: Turning Mourning into a Movement with Rep. Lucy McBath 2020).

that Lucia Kay McBath has with Mamie Till-Mobley, matriarch of activism in the twentieth century's civil rights struggle, reveal an approach to American Evangelical history that accommodates centering political work while also challenging standard historical narratives in the field that focus on conservative and reactionary Christian activism. For religious studies, Black religious women activists' memoirs, at times collaborative works with co-authors, reveal what Afro-Atlantic religions scholar Rachel Elizabeth Harding found in finishing the memoir of her deceased mother, Rosemarie Freeney Harding (1930–2004). From Rachel's perspective, Rosemary turned to memoir because "[s]he was trying to get well from the accumulation of burdens she carried, using the writing as a way to explore how she and other movement people had come through trauma in the past." Black religious women activists' memoirs not only "bring the indigenous wisdom of the African American community, particularly of women, into engagement with more academic understandings of intellectual production."¹⁰⁵ As the Hardings' co-authored memoir reveals, memoir production is also a means for these women to carry along their deceased loved ones as the writer processes loss, faces trauma, and envisions their loved one's ongoing, immaterial presence as richly instructive for justly (re)ordering the world of the living.

A turn toward Black women's religious narratives, as they claim spiritual and social authority via religious experience, may allow for continued discussions of religion and political activism while also refracting conventional notions of the place of Evangelical religious discourses around salvation, providence, witness, and mission. Black Evangelical Christian memoirs also bear the potential to spotlight Black women living in, and witnessing against, systems of mass criminalization and incarceration.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, both Till and McBath have roots in Chicago; more examinations of Great Migration-era African American storefront churches and urban religious life would also do well to further the discussion of American Evangelicalism across racial divides, as well as hone the complex social and political practices of women-centered Black religious communities and homes.¹⁰⁷ Lastly, centering activists like Till, McBath, and others helps to complicate the portrait of the "Evangelical left" as a predominantly white Christian phenomenon. With Mothers of the Movement, scholars—and Americans—face the task of acknowledging anti-Black violence as a religious matter that provokes Black women's work for the reformation of souls, customs, laws, and of our systems of justice.

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¹⁰⁵ (Harding and Harding 2015, pp. xviii, xx).

¹⁰⁶ See (Brown-Long and Mauger 2019; Green 2017; McTighe and Green 2018).

¹⁰⁷ See (Best 2005).

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