

## NEW APPROACHES TO RELIGION AND POWER

### Series editor: Joerg Rieger

While the relationship of religion and power is a perennial topic, it only continues to grow in importance and scope in our increasingly globalized and diverse world. Religion, on a global scale, has openly joined power struggles, often in support of the powers that be. But at the same time, religion has made major contributions to resistance movements. In this context, current methods in the study of religion and theology have created a deeper awareness of the issue of power: critical theory, cultural studies, postcolonial theory, subaltern studies, feminist theory, critical race theory, and working class studies are contributing to a new quality of study in the field. This series is a place for both studies of particular problems in the relation of religion and power as well as for more general interpretations of this relation. It undergirds the growing recognition that religion can no longer be studied without the study of power.

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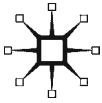
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Messianism Against Christology  
Resistance Movements,  
Folk Arts, and Empire

*James W. Perkinson*

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MESSIANISM AGAINST CHRISTOLOGY

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*Dedicated to the All the Creatures—Human and “Other”—Whose  
Living Beauty Refuses to Capitulate to the POWERS.*

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This book has its immediate departure in my relationship with my wife of ten years, whose ever restive search, alongside my own, has been the great gift of my life. A Filipina of most marked soulfulness, Lily's quest for what is truly just and sustainable on this damaged and wailing planet has ever checked my own, when I have gone lazy or naïve. The cultural "matrimony" of irrepressible humor, florid love of color, palm-tree-pliant resilience, and exquisite sensibility she bears, gives every day meaning to the indigenous romance this work in part represents. In writing, I can never be entirely sure whose song I am singing. But let the reader (and the husband) not be misled. Beneath the delicate tuning of cultures yet carrying memory of their birthing from demanding soils, there is a ferocious resourcefulness. I grow ever more astonished at the deep ancestors of our race, the more I wrestle with our contemporary surfeit of war, poverty and ecological wreckage! To all who have given sustenance on the way to this place and moment: hail. And they are not only human.

I confess a shrunk soul, struggling to learn languages long lost. I have labored in the process of this writing to bring a house plant back from death through daily care and gentle talk—trusting against my hard modern heart, that someone was "home" in the leaves and stem and loam. I have begun growing heirloom corn. I cry to the sun. I put out food for spiders and squirrels. And all of it looms as so much futile effort, while limbs are torn by bombs I pay for thousands of miles from my home, and homeless ones a block away spend the meager dollar I sometimes give back, knowing their loss has probably fueled my own comfort through all the intricacies of racist housing policy and banking practice. I know the names of a few of these "other ones." I fight politically against the plundering in ways I know how. But mostly I eat and write, and dream, oblivious.



Yes, I thank parents and friends, colleagues at Ecumenical Theological Seminary and Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education, all my coconspirators in resisting corporate takeover of Detroit and the country, fellow poets at city venues, artists whose riots of imagination keep my own amazed, authors and teachers who regularly send my spirit on trek or plunge me into rage at the pillage that rampages unchecked. But here especially, I want to serve notice of kin whose fins and antennae, roots and wings and fur, my culture and Christianity has never known how to acknowledge, much less feed in kind. To them, a soft thank you, and a resolve to live fiercely, create relentlessly, grieve unabashedly, and finally give unreservedly of my own substance and body, when the time comes, “to be eaten” even as I eat!

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## INTRODUCTION

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# *Junk Installation: Messianic Art and Social Movement*

Art is medicine, and then you can take it beyond . . . (Tyre Guyton, comment while painting car hoods on Heidelberg Street).

He answered, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out (Lk 19:40).

### **On the Street in Detroit**

When the situation is dire and response is critical, the messianic appears as “shock art.” Since I am writing about a particular kind of sign in particular spaces and times, I begin where I live. This book finds its founding emblem in brightly colored folk-faces painted on rusting car hoods displayed on a ghetto street in inner city Detroit. The artist is Tyree Guyton. The street is Heidelberg—now become internationally (in)famous as site of these startlingly colorful apparitions. The faces he calls, “faces of God” (Figure I.1).

Leering wildly from dozens of upended panels of dented sheet metal scavenged from nearby junk yards, this art is not part of the “ruins porn” for which postindustrial Detroit has gained a certain recent notoriety (and shows up now on YouTube as the icon of chic desolation for those who do not have to inhabit the images). No, here an entire block has become outdoor stage for a running battle with authorities since the late 1980s. Guyton, growing up poor and fatherless in a family under duress on this German-named byway, deep in the old black neighborhood of the near east side called Paradise Valley, is a local phoenix. His project has twice been wrecked by official decree. Dodging bulldozers where others dodge bullets, he has grown a community. In his project’s first incarnation beginning in 1986,



**Figure I.1** Heidelberg Project car hoods.

the house next door to his own “spoke to him one day” and thereby over-night became the central frame for an insurgent reappearance of garbage—found objects, scavenged from weed-racked lots, splashed with paint, nailed onto the wood structure like a postmodern cross, seething with meanings obvious and occult, writhing across the eye with a death that refused to die. Dolls and clocks, suitcases and rakes, stuffed animals and steering wheels, old telephones and new street signs—whatever had been discarded was fair game for the gravity-defying frame-up and bold emblazoning. Bicycles climbed tree limbs upside down; shoes dangled from the high branches—symbol of what Guyton’s grandfather remembered as the soles (souls) of those lynched back in the family’s deep-South past. “Dead” vacuum cleaners lined up in battle-formation like sentinels on drill parade in the side yard—evoking shades of Ezekiel’s bone-valley and the command to prophesy . . . ! And polka dots covered the street surface in a riot of inverted balloons! As one wag crooned, you turn the corner here, in this section of Detroit’s bitter blight, and it’s suddenly like “someone just turned the sun on!” (Figure I.2).



**Figure I.2** Heidelberg Project OJ House front.

After the first bulldozing—multiple machines knocking over the house in a mere 15-minute barrage, accompanied by a helicopter and blaring police horns—Guyton and friends staged a funeral, buried the house-body with all its chromatic blazons shouting like so much multicolored blood, and hunkered down into the lesson. Within months, the grandfather died, whispering, “You can’t stop!” And Guyton didn’t. He had already been, a few years before, dismissed, from one of the city’s premier art programs, as too renegade. This was now one more “pound down” of heavy manners on outlaw meanings that he would simply refuse to abide. Instead, at his instigation, the suppressed polka dots came roaring back from the underground like a raging cotillion of ancestors, suddenly showing up on every blighted structure all across the city-scape, compliments of guerrilla “taggers” working midnight shifts in anonymous come-uppance. A 1956 bus carcass, resurrected from its scrapheap, was ferried into the ‘hood, swarmed by neighbor kids wielding brushes, and rendered like a bullet-spray of color, machine-gunning every least glance with a war of dots. Looking like a jelly bean jar on its

side—in honor of his departed grandpa’s favorite snack—the bus commemorated at once Tyree’s birth-year and Rosa Parks’ initiation of the Montgomery Boycott, as well as the refusal of either figure (and of all this resurgent tint!) to stay in place. Another city-assault in 1999 erased another one-third of the creativity, but neither court-summons nor neighbors’ derision could halt the upwelling of percussive brightness (Figure I.3).

Today, the installation evolves. A hummer doused in pastel pink and half-buried as a sign of its coming “peak oil” demise—led by an upright pink bicycle bearing an arrow stating, “this way to the future”—served to mark Detroit’s hosting of the 2010 US Social Forum. This gathering of twenty-thousand activists from across the land for a week of skills-sharing and vision-trading reveled in sheer celebration of D-Town innovation. Guyton-like glam proliferating on the eye-slamming sides of buildings throughout Detroit (as indeed around the globe wherever his tactic has gained a following) mirrored the movement: a Do-It-Yourself insurgence animated by inner city residents populating the postindustrial abandonment with proliferating gardens (more than one



**Figure I.3** Heidelberg Project street polka dots.

thousand as of the Forum's opening), and a proliferating population of entrepreneurial youth busily creating their own media-tropolis outside the corporate image or dollar. Meanwhile on Heidelberg itself, a white fellow artist had moved in across the street years earlier and begun putting up his own corral of resurgent detritus—charred timbers from a long-defunct auto plant presiding like a trinity of *nkisi*-statues awaiting the nails of healing, auto guts and plumbing parts winding around the grounds begging divining like the innards of an animal, bright cryptograms in languorous longhand on every wayward shard (such as liquor bottles hung around the edges of a big TV set bearing the inscription, “Found: Weapons of Mass Destruction”).<sup>1</sup> And Tyree's own spectral puns continue to propagate—4 × 8 plywood paintings of a single high-heeled shoe, boldly marked with the word “God,” marching across a vacant lot, proclaiming a coming “stomping” for a bureaucracy of corruption; an old stove crammed with used Nikes like a porcelain exclamation point warning of holocaust; mirrors or TV sets scribbled with vermilion riddles. All of it landing, like an uppercut to the eyeball, jamming death and life into the same sign, in militant silence asking out loud, “How do you read?” (Figures I.4 and I.5).



**Figure I.4** Heidelberg Project buried hummer.



**Figure I.5** Heidelberg Project street north view.

### On the Page in Palestine

And such indeed is the theme of this writing. This is a book about “Christ”—or more classically stated, *christology*: the ground or logic or discourse on a certain “hallowing” or “haunting” of a human being judged iconic and momentous for the entire enterprise of “being human” in history. More precisely, I mean to lift up a *logos* about *christos* here as the “marking out,” in various media, of a defiant modality of signifying in a situation of struggle and early demise. And the absence of the definite particle “the” before the chosen designation “christ” is meant to be troubling and suggestive. The “anointing” (in Greek, *christos*) in question is not simply “one” (as in “anointed one,” “the Christ”), but a “commonality of enablement” or even “commons of the spirit,” visited on an individual for a communal purpose, emerging historically in early Israel’s experience as a means of specifying focus and magnifying significance. Leaders were marked out and designated such in a public ritual by the pouring of caul-fat from animal sacrifices on the heads of those specified for focal attention (transferring the vital animal “powers” to the one anointed). That is to say, ancient “christening”—plying

the human body with the juices and life-force of an “other” body—was a mode of artistic signifying. Smearing skin with the glistening substance of dead ancestors (oils of emulsified plant and animal bodies representing the primal remains of the earliest ancestry we have) served as a dramaturgical sign of purpose. We might even say the act imbued the one so marked as more than just one—as a multiple, bearing an entire ecology of powers.<sup>2</sup> And it was not even limited solely to humans. Indeed, one of the term’s primary meanings is “to paint,” and the earliest biblical instance of “anointing” is what Jacob does to the Dreaming Stone of the Canaanite highlands whose terrifying<sup>3</sup> visions of the night led him to consecrate the rock-set-up-as-a-pillar as “God’s House” (“Bethel”) (Davidson 1970, 519; Gen 28:10–22; 35:14). And the riff offered here on such anointing—as the creative figuring of a certain ancestral surplus (the dead “who do not stay dead,” as Toni Morrison might venture)—is critical, as we see in the following text.

The exploration to follow will claim that the favored medium of such a portentous “signing” is not merely the flesh of a certain human named “Jesus,” but a representational artifice about the meaning of his way of living—prefaced by those he learned from, and continued by those who learned from him. Its quintessential image is the creative judo done by agonized humans on desperate circumstances, making pain yield beauty in spite of itself. We are not used to thinking of the *Ur-Texts* of *Yehoshua* as art—but these gospel craftings of the following of Jesus are the only sources we have for what we mean by christic apparition. Here, I am thinking especially of the recent work on Mark’s gospel by activist educator, Ched Myers, whose painstaking 500-page elaboration of a socioliterary method of exegeting the text makes abundantly clear the way this first witness to a particular life lived against the grain of empire is indeed a prodigiously artful achievement—as much the mandala of a seriously revolutionary movement, continuing into the present, as the mnemonic of a fetishized figure of the past (Myers 1988, 116, 448 ff.). The classical text of incarnation is in fact a sharp angle of artistic conjuration intending proliferation—whether in written forms quickly multiplying in the first century as the gospels and epistles of early disciples like John and Paul (and indeed dozens more, canonically accepted and not), or at a much further remove and later date in time like today, in slash-and-burn color such as Guyton and crew spew on urban blight. Christology can be as well read from a dis rap spit by eloquent anger inside the trap of urban adolescence as from a parable fashioned in the Galilee outback by a renegade prophet on run from the authorities; as hauntingly “sent up” by a jazz note stalking midnight



losses in a forgotten club south of Eight Mile as by a hymn to the *logos* of all-things-created prefaced to the Book of Signs known as *KATA IΩANNHN* (the actual Greek title to John's gospel). Such is the argument to come.

And I argue that these are all—yes, *all!*—merely local augurings of a diverse but global phenomenon. Once entertained, discerned, and practiced, the perceived presence (*parousia*) shows its face everywhere as a way of defying domination in service of a wildly beautiful creativity: antique amulets of the outback of Ethiopia under imperial Rome or the reliquary of a teenage martyr in Provence granting hope to peasants, *yagé*-induced incantations evoking shamanic visions of healing contesting missionary aggression in the Amazon or Celtic “illuminatory” craft on a vellum page, giving a druidic/talismanic halo to otherwise “orthodox” christological subjects in early medieval Ireland. In a word, incarnation will be entertained here as an artfulness that possesses, gaining historical purchase in social movements that refuse merely to be possessed (by domination). And *christology* will proceed then as a mode of reading the logics of those contested possessions, a giving of sense to the signs, emerging from the wrack and ruins of history, that animate such resistance movements with the unrepentant energies of those suffering and slain unjustly. Obviously, saying such departs somewhat dramatically from classical christology with all of its concern to secure a monopoly of meaning to a singular life lived and killed under Roman hegemony in first century Palestine. So let me set out a preliminary warrant to the argument.

### Method in the Messianism

We live in a time when intellectual certainty about the difference between modernity and all else that has gone before has begun to second guess its claims to either uniqueness or superiority. In recent years, in the neck of the intellectual woods I hang out in, “political theology” has emerged as a hot topic on both sides of the divide between religious reflection and secular theorization. In one sense, what follows here occupies a small niche in that larger debate. While some thinkers would query the appropriateness of the term “theological”—angling in favor of a more generalized and less parochial term like “religion” (though itself under challenge as also code for colonial hubris and misprision)—the adoption of the central term of Christian reflection offers a certain historical specificity that is germane. The very fact that theorists around the globe are engaged in exchanges about such issues arises as an effect

of the troubled and ongoing history of Western expansionist policy across the entire landscape of colonial struggle. That expansion took place under the direction of a quintessentially Christian conviction of mission responsibility and theological certainty. “Theology” accurately identifies the terrain of epistemic elaboration that first leveraged the modern colonial enterprise, both among its explicitly clerical apologists and on the ground among its varied commercial protagonists.

When a polity such as the United States began to articulate a space of disestablishment between church and state, the experiment laid down a line of differentiation that became definitive for most of the theoretical notions of modernity that followed. “The secular” and “the religious” were imagined as domains that in principle could be maintained as separate in the formality of their respective powers, if not always in the content of their practices or the influence of their discourses. That a more recent hermeneutics of suspicion has had to entertain doubt even about the very form of its own constitution (that it too, might be quasi-theological) only reinforces the point about the particularity of the theological that now demands closer accounting as a haunting even of the most rigorously entertained commitments to secularity. It is not religion in general that ghosts the grounding under theorizations of the modern political state, but more accurately “Christianity.” And thus a concern for the productivity of a concept like political theology—even in pursuit, for example, of greater clarity on a purportedly hybrid political formation like a “democratic” Islamic state—remains a concern suffused with “Christian” imagination. It is after all the Greek *theos*, not the Arabic *allah*, that anchors the ethos of the term.

The effort here then zeroes in on the centripetal force suffusing that “theological ghosting” to render explicit and thematic the messianic presumption that colors the whole (indeed today, “ghosts” it in the tones of a nearly invisible miasma of messianic “whiteness”). The theological—in our concrete historical itinerary of continuing Western hegemony—inevitably carries a charge of the christological. If Mark Taylor is concerned in his recent work on this terrain (*The Theological and the Political*) to articulate the “politicality of theology” then I am pushing the discourse here toward an even more sharply focused “politicality of christology,” for which I prefer the somewhat less obviously loaded (but no less particular and weighted) term “messianism”<sup>4</sup> (M. Taylor 2011, 3). But where Taylor’s book offers a sophisticated quadrille of what might be called transimmanence theory, working through the complicated steps of the likes of Foucault and Bourdieu, Butler and Schatzki, Agamben and Nancy and Spivak in five “theophanous” chapters of quite

compelling beauty, here I rather seek to mambo suggestively through the vernacular practices of subaltern peoples, beginning with the biblical traditions of such and hop-stepping adventitiously forward. Taylor's predilection for the "prodigious force of artful signs deployed in spectral practice" is prescient and delineates a similar emphasis in this work (especially as that artistry is given historical purchase in social movements of resistance "weighing in" against the weight of the social ontology subordinated peoples are forced to inhabit and habituate; M. Taylor 2011, xii). Indeed, in one sense, this work is a grateful riff on his, taking up a bit of the gauntlet and some of the articulation he himself offered to other scholars in closing his work (M. Taylor 2011, 224–225).

I argue that christology must also be shifted away from doctrine to sign. In its subaltern emergence as a "Little Tradition" idiom, it is better comprehended as an artful form of judo performed on violence—coiled inwards with intense subtleties and gestured outwards with often disguised but equally intense ferocities. Its signal feature will show up as the conveyance of a charge of unresolved history, cast in official theological terms as "resurrection," but open to other figurings in the cultural codes of other movements struggling under other forms of duress than those of occupied Palestine of the first century. Cast, for instance, in the black vernacular of the earliest modern "settlers" of this continent<sup>5</sup> who made common cause with native inhabitants in 1526 after going *cimarron* from Spanish enslavement, I would call this is a *messianism of haints*. But however it is cast, recognizing such today requires the discernment of a seething<sup>6</sup> surplus of unliv'd aspiration, prematurely buried in the grave, but now ghosting the living with an unfinished groan. This is a surplus upwardly fracking social order with an inverse injection of prodigious artifice, galvanizing movement against the impossibility of hope, granting inarticulate motion a calligraphy of explosive expression or sly coloration. It opens a slight trace of dawn at the very heart of an existential midnight, releasing beauty from the prison house of orthodox censure and spirit from capitalist dismissal, in groping toward momentary embodiments of "other worlds" and ways of being together on the planet.

To return for a moment to Guyton's "hood-winking" representations of Motor City struggle with which I began this reflection, it is worth noting that my reading of his art as christic is not imposition or cooptation from without. Guyton himself regularly invokes Christian imagery and sayings, and in his signature video of the project (significantly entitled "Come Unto Me"), quotes the passage in John 9:1–11 where Jesus puts "mud" (some of the soil found under his feet mixed with his

own spit) on the eye of a blind person he is attempting to heal. Guyton does so while the video footage depicts him scavenging car parts from neighborhood junk yards which he will mix with his creative coloring and then “put” on the eyes of his supporters and critics alike, asking, in effect, “Do you now see?” But Guyton will likewise refuse to be contained by the discourse he invokes, continuously moving the Christian signs out of place—putting crosses on doll houses on the sidewalk or the word “God” on a picture tube cantilevered out of an abandoned house window or on any number of other objects he arranges throughout his installation.

And the “faces of God” he slashes onto car hoods are such not because they are recognizable faces of Jesus. Their christic power is rather, I would argue, borne by their awakening strikes of color. The percussive force of the brightly juxtaposed yellows and reds, blues and greens—in features whose textures are raw, *brut*, and capable of signifying complexly from a minimalist folk vocabulary of lines and shapes—is force indeed. It is the flash of their contrast, the bold simplicity of their stark primality, that accomplishes the effect I am calling “christic.” They awaken inchoate energies into ribald leanings and inclinations that want to shout against every convention of containment and down-pressing. Eyes suddenly sparkle with epiphany, tongues with poetry! Or indeed, with complaint! In effect, Guyton’s bold palette and harsh juxtapositions continuously open that inner city neighborhood to its underground energies not just of celebration, but of contradiction, dissent, and begging to differ—which is exactly what they did do, from day one. Much of the community protested his early designs as “refuse”—a literal insult to the eye. One neighborhood picketer even opined in response that “art belongs in a museum, caged up like an animal” under lock and key. Guyton responded in counterpoint by commending the resistance. At least the silence had been torn open, and the subtext given a public airing. This was “subaltern logos” unleashed—messy, groaning, combative, but alive. Other neighbors confessed rather a kind of “resurrection”: young people destined to become drug dealers by ten years of age and die early, now catching sight—and having a literal hand in—a different vision of life, animated by paint brushes and color, using only what was already underfoot.

Guyton himself is ever prescient in his own confessions. He names his grandfather as inspiration—the literal in-filling of whose spirit enabled the project in the first place. Grandpa Mackey (as he is known) first championed Tyree’s art-impulse in a poor family afraid of the lack of economic prospect of an art career. And while the enterprise in a real

sense killed the old man with heartbreak after it was first bulldozed in 1991, it is his spirit and irrepressible-ness that lives on through the coloration. “Color” indeed, as the body of resurrection! Percussion as its mode of being! And Tyree as poet-of-the-hand, figuring the anti-death in ever-renewed frames of resistance (and perhaps there is even room here to see the channeling of outrage over his loss of three brothers to street violence over the years). Initially a lone-ranger existence of “speaking against” the wall of urban decay and municipal law and art school norms of “art.” But soon gathered into a movement—following that today has waxed international in scope and finds its deepest anchor in an emergent DIY (“do it yourself”) sensibility challenging the police-state coercions of big government and big finance across an entire planet (like the sign of an upstart David against a huge market-force Goliath). This is a “grow-your-own-beauty” aesthetic whose co-dependent arising (to borrow a Buddhist term) includes an anti-agribusiness “grow-your-own-food” economics and alternative-media “grow-your-own-story” politics—a ground-swelling movement of “multitudes”<sup>7</sup> whose true potency we are just beginning to sense in upwellings as diverse as the Arab Spring abroad and locovore orientations at home. And I want also to name it—in a provocation whose justification is the rest of the book—“christological.”

### Messianic Effects

Now consider what Guyton’s wanton paint-bombing accomplished. The city weighed in heavily, came down hard—bulldozers, police, and helicopter surveillance. Tyree’s artistic “incarnations” on that decimated block set off a chain of responses that ultimately revealed the city as “principality” in the language of spiritual discernment (being reclaimed in our day by the likes of William Stringfellow, Walter Wink, and Bill Wylie Kellermann as we see in chapter 5). Heidelberg became a site of sudden epiphany, art meets empire. The provocation had succeeded in making apparent a whole series of interlocking causalities that determine why some people have a monopoly on office buildings and suburban residences, “authorized” bullets and hired bulldozers, while others suffer in the anonymity of urban blight. Guyton himself—in the video production extolling his work—underscores the reality. While dashing a crumpled car-hood with the bold strokes of a God-face, he comments, “the art you see is the ‘front’ or facade; underneath is the spiritual reality of war.” Growing up, a paint brush for him was the possibility of creating freedom. The first time Grandpa Mackey placed one in his

hand at age nine, it “burned,” he says—perhaps a tiny tactile version of Moses’ visual experience of flaming foliage. It was also “medicine”—a mode of healing exorcism. But it was likewise something you could “take beyond,” in Guyton’s words, to begin to query the boundaries of your world, the containment that chokes off energy and warps identity. From his expulsion from art school, through the multiple bulldozings of his installation, to hauling the city into court and fighting over charges and fines, Guyton has regularly touched the “beast underneath” the sullen silence of urban blight. This is the subtext of oppression: the covert assemblage of seething forces ghosting the machinery of big government and big capital. It is a complex interlinkage of powers—a racialized housing market,<sup>8</sup> postwar white flight, corporate relocation and asset drain to separatist suburbs, colonialist policing, etc.—whose labyrinthine ruthlessness is nearly impossible to make clear.

But suddenly, in the cold November air of 1991, that juggernaut of forces was conjured into daylight through the encounter of bright street art with big machines and blue badges in a couple of hours of unmistakable “state repression.” Yes, neighbors in the hood had complained and served as the street-level surrogates of those large-scale “powers,” and yes, they even had “cause”—their uncomfortable experience, as the installation gained fame and drew visitors, of living in a fish-bowl of outsider gaze and disruption, wandering through their neighborhood on a daily basis (Beardsley 2007, 42, 46; Herron 2007, 3–4; Jackson 2007, 26, 31). But the choice between relentless immersion in the harsh silences of imposed impoverishment or continuous negotiation with naïve (suburban) voyeurism and media attention is hardly a worthy choice. Tyree forced the issue—and today that neighborhood has gained a “follower-ship” of disciplined supporters, organizing for material support, staging community activities of all kinds (a small garden of vegetables, regular days of performance for young street artists, plans and funding for a center offering education and inspiration, etc.) and continuing to probe the broader urban (and indeed global) context concerning the policies and priorities that decimate inner city neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup>

Such is by no means utopia, nor is Guyton easily packaged (and thereby “disposed of,” as Dorothy Day would challenge) as a “saint.” But the now quarter-century saga of this project does stand as sign and can be easily read as gospel. But in so doing, it is equally critical to hold what we mean by New Testament “gospel” accountable to the wild beauty, renegade humor, and blight-busting brightness rising phoenix-like and uncontainable from the burned building hulks and the refuse-as-palette met with on Heidelberg (indeed, I use the video that tracks

Heidelberg's history, in courses I teach, as a riff on Mark's version of the Jesus-story, reading back and forth between the two in a cross-signifying manner that is mutually revealing of the stakes of trying to be human in an infracuman situation). I am hard put any more to say which augurs more deeply or stirs more passionately my own desire to "mean something" and live fiercely on behalf of "spirit." And this for me is the crux: how one "reads" and how one is "read by" (and enlivened and moved and compelled to action by) the *animation* of things. I am interested here in what might be called a *messianism of animation*—what postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak has lately dreamed of as "animist theologies of liberation," beholden not to old doctrines and decrepit orthodoxies, but to living ecologies and justice (Spivak 1999, 382–383).

And the issue is not just "messianic flesh," like that of Jesus of Nazareth, but the articulation of subaltern spaces for revivification and movement. How provoke the third eye to grasp a hidden transcript—what might be called "renegade rearrangements of possibility," prying open "breathing room" for insurgent energy? Such is Guyton's project. Like a sudden clearing in a napalmed forest, Heidelberg Street has been recast as a huddle of leering witnesses holding a clandestine meeting in a war-zone, recreating the block as a conspiracy. Attempting to give word to the effect the houses and art assemblages have while one is walking this block, we might say this is a "cathedral" of chameleon dilapidation—ruins and flotsam shamanized into dancing colors spitting riddles. Rather than a Gregorian chant "echo chamber" of dead Christian saints staring down from the walls in an imperial basilica of ancient Rome, this is trash art under a junk aesthetic, "squatting" and signifying at the edge of two sidewalks. Its secrets enter not through the ears, but the eyes and skin. The experience of the energies arcing between these stark "ghetto" apparitions, tattooing the air with jagged mirth, is like being in a hall of mirrors—except they never reflect the same way twice, nor do they simply affirm the on-looker. Here is guffawing irony! Laughing puzzles, tweaking idols, and idolatries! This is the grave-revolt of disappeared homeless and displaced children, coming back in bodies of dead commodities and living paint! The staunch march of raucous polka dots on the street-surface is like the track of a strange ancestral visitation, whispering with rumor, jeering in gossip. The houses themselves peer down like menhirs, mute with memory and prophecy . . . or with recognizable soliloquy on recognizable officials or conceits (Detroit City Council doings are frequent targets of some of the visual puns and bright epithets)! In religious studies terminology, the result is a form of "urban shamanism," with Tyree as vibrant

medium, awake to the codification of information and energy locked up in the discarded bodies and abandoned hulks of the inner city ecology. Under his hand and sense of dramaturgy, their witness is unlocked and made vivid for the daily struggle to survive.<sup>10</sup>

But Heidelberg represents also a montage community. The art here is no longer just Guyton's vision or juxtaposition, but an entire open commentary—visitors invited spontaneously to add their own dots to the houses or street, or stuffed animals and sharp ideas to one of the installations. It stands as a “living museum” of the people, who not only visit but also leave on deposit, their own “word” or image or (literally!) the shoes from their feet, destined for a paint brush and display. This work does not only serve but also incorporate; it is not simply “for” but “of” the community (B. Taylor 2011, 4). It is at once a shrine and a manifesto to a rising from the ashes of an entire city—alternative to down-top design and authorized policy and the despair of poverty alike. Its seething presences are indeed messianic—and signal the insurgence this book seeks to celebrate.

But isn't putting such a claim at the fore of a work on christology mere bombast and hot air—a send up of canonical norms and theological “certainties” so wild and oblique as to be laughably cavalier?

### **Messianism Against Christology**

This work has grown out of a course I've taught for more than a decade now. Its precise purpose is to situate christology in relationship to its own cultural particularity and codification—from biblical versions of the same, forward through its varied historical wanderings and missionary promulgations—to try to facilitate a different Christian response to the rest of the world than has been the case for much of its history. It is patent that most of the one-fifth of the world's people who today claim to be Christian do so out of a conviction that Christianity is somehow truer than other religious convictions or practices. Whatever else it purports to be, Christianity is at least a mode of felt and lived religious superiority—all disclaimers of arrogance or protestations of modesty to the good (i.e., the typical evangelical “I'm-just-a-worm” deference to divine sovereignty). And that deep sense of primacy has colored Christian approaches to relations with others historically.

But what is “religious,” what “cultural,” and what “economic” and “political” are not so easily separable. Religious convictions of supremacy do not simply stay put in the pew. They animate—and are reinforced by—material relations of domination and subordination.



The Iraq and Afghanistan wars of late, for instance, were initiated in the name of US national security, but build implicitly and continuously on taken-for-granted notions of cultural and religious superiority in securing (tacit, if no longer enthusiastic) support from the US populace. They are simply the latest “race” wars over resources, legitimized by an inchoate religiocultural conviction of superiority and entitlement that is not easily separable from the rest of what goes by the name of “modern Western civilization” or simply “our American way of life.”

The damnable real-life effects of this Western messianic complex—promising one or another version of universal salvation (whether spiritual or political or economic) and encoding an intractable presumption of supremacy—is all too evident in even a cursory survey of modern history. In its name, native peoples have been genocidally “reduced” and disappeared from their lands, Africans genocidally enslaved and racialized as a replacement labor force, and more recently, an entire globe annexed and plundered in the corporate project of economic takeover and cultural reengineering that has come to embody that earlier Christian conviction of superiority and entitlement. Of course, the five-hundred-year development of this sociopolitical juggernaut enshrined in a particular religiocultural hegemony is complex, multidimensional, and ever morphing. My gloss on modern Western development as an almost irresistible cultural force elaborating a continuity of political and religious violence is mere gloss. But it invokes, for this work, the ever-throbbing foreground (of arrogance) and unrequited background (of anguish) against which I want to think “christologically.”

Given such, my own purpose here (among others) is one of seeking to open up space for genuine encounter and activist solidarity (in a search for greater global justice) between Christian forms of resistance and similar initiatives animated by “little tradition” cultures rooted in local ecologies.<sup>11</sup> But doing so, I would assert, requires incessant vigilance against an ancient but profound imperial impetus to *presume* Christianity as the greater truth, simply by definition (what Christianity supposedly *is*). My concern for such emerges especially out of personal and practical experience of dealing with the modern offspring of this Christian presumption of superiority—the kindred forces of white racial supremacy and middle class convictions of economic entitlement—as these recurrently surfaced in my relations with my lower income neighbors of color in inner city Detroit where I have lived for more than 25 years. There I have been vigorously called out (or subtly put in place) any time I have inadvertently channeled a bit of flatulent white arrogance. But I have also just as vigorously been invited to plunge into a surprising and

rewarding practice of mutuality and shared struggle whenever I have managed to respond creatively and respectfully to the necessities of the moment. (And the allusion here to a kind of “baptismal initiation”—with its attendant necessity for something like “exorcism”—is critical and key.) This 25-year regimen of deeply encountered and often harshly negotiated “difference” has become the crucible from which most of my theorizing and conceptualizing now emerges. As I have written in depth about this experience of race and its discontents elsewhere, here I only hint in the briefest of rehearsals.

An early evangelical experience of “born again” fervor, followed by baptism into charismatic spirituality and commitment, led to motivation as a 23-year old to move into an impoverished Motor City neighborhood as part of a residential Christian community, “hell bent” on helping inner city folk deal with their decimated circumstance. Only gradually, over the course of a decade, did that patronizing arrogance fade before the intransigence of the forces pillaging the neighborhood. Slowly, the hardness of ghetto life pried scales off of eyes blinded by white presumption and prejudice. Black community members and neighborhood residents alike knew deeply the reality of the economic powers enacting racial perceptions and the political will that would keep such in place. And they took a much longer and more tragic (and comic) view of the possibilities of change, the necessities of survival, and the pleasures of small triumphs. Once I was finally awakened to the intensity of the battle daily waged in that neighborhood among those laboring under the stereotypes and inside the social structures in which dominant society had incarcerated them, my own impulse to “help” withered to more human scale, and the desire to learn took its place.

What began to appear with ever clearer aspect was the immense creativity and heart-rending ferocity with which so many of my inner city neighbors regularly engaged life. Some of that *élan* was coded as “Christian” and transacted as “church,” but most of it was lived out simply as a style of communicating, a mode of improvising, and a “colorfulness of being” (literally and figuratively) that was simply remarkable. Genius in making desperation yield beauty in spite of itself was in evidence all around me in measures large and small, and I was astonished at both my neighbors’ precocity and my own incapacity, in kind. I fell in love in response and was therein plunged into an initiatory reformation that has not ceased to alter my sense of self—and way of living—ever since. It is that willingness to be altered in response to an “other” way of being that looms now as the touchstone for my thinking about

most things visionary and valuable (such as religion or in this case, christology).

Shaped by the predilections that have resulted from this particular history, the book that follows here is a collection of essays exploring questions of justice and sustainability, representation and identity, art and symbology, as these arise in various historical moments both inside and outside normative christological discourse about Jesus. The basic thesis is that messianic talk about Jesus began in what anthropology would identify as the “Little Tradition” idiom of first century Palestinian peasants, conserving memory of an older way of living more sustainably on the land, but gradually shifted over into official “Great Tradition” christological discourses, as the messianic Jewish peasant movement transformed itself, first into an urban Greco-Roman religion after the Jewish War (65–66 CE), and then into an imperial cult after Constantine (313 CE). In such a transformation from subordinate orality to dominant and dominating literacy, from vernacular story to classical doctrine, messianic resistance to injustice, as often as not, had to go underground and adopt ironic subversion as its modality, in counterpoint to its own cooptation by organized wealth and power as a discourse of apology for the reigning sociopolitical order. “Christology,” in such a perspective, has to develop a sense for the hidden transcript of resistance, camouflaged inside or underneath, the public transcript of canonical agreement. Or said another way, the problematic is that of “minor messianisms” and vernacular “counter-christologies” opening living space underneath or alongside of a dominant and dominating Christologos. The book is an exploration of that subjugated knowledge and its varied arts of practice.

### **Overview of the Walk-Through**

At the most basic level, the effort here can be comprehended as a vernacular critique of the christology that emerges historically from the fourth gospel. The Logos-Hymn appended to John’s narrative line opened the door to an emphasis that proved very strategic for empire, as we see. It began a pilgrimage of focus from “folk arts” and “social movement” to “philosophical containment.” On the other hand, however, John’s way of narrating his story under a regime of messianic “traces” (his so-called Book of Signs, organizing the first 11 chapters) is suggestive for my own organization of material. Most of the effort expended here concentrates on retrieving from the tradition’s formative texts and time, a reading of Christology “from below” and beholden to a messianism rooted in the

land. Since so much of Christianity takes its direction from this formative period that generated both the canonical scriptures themselves and their orthodox interpretation, the heaviest weight of work will focus on these *Ur*-texts and developments. The concern is to open new vistas of perception, not offer a definitive interpretation. It could hardly be otherwise when the topic is folk arts and peasant movements, the subject typically “subaltern,” and space quite limited.

What follows then is a sequence of chapters beginning with a general overview (styled as “Wildlands Memorialized”) of the way I exegete “messianism” and “the messianic” as a counter-reading to orthodox Christology (chapter 1), and then proceeding through three areas of focus. The first part keys on the “messianic signs” that shape the tradition *biblically*, looking at the particular Hebrew figures Jesus drafts into artful invocation animating his own teaching (chapter 2), and then tracking the way his followers craft their memories into gospel narratives of movement events and emphases (chapter 3). Here the privileged art forms are “Ancestral Invocation” and “Parabolic Incantation,” respectively. Part two traces the subtle but seismic shift in context and content, when a rural Galilean movement is pulled into an urban imperial orbit and reformulated under a literate concern for *theological* canonicity and orthodoxy. Pauline theorizing of imperial aggrandizement as an operation of “principalities and powers” and Johannine recourse to the logos-doctrine (Jh 1:1–18) begin to install “Metaphysical Speculation” as the new art of confessional commitment. But this is also a moment when the tradition necessarily galvanizes a counter-tradition in which rural folk-practice must “occult” its own local land-orientation and village-ethic that are increasingly at odds with the universalizing vision of imperial orthodoxy. Ethiopian peasant use of “Talismanic Depiction” supplies a kind of test case for a vast history and repertoire of indigenous arts of resistance, through which canonical subject matter is regularly conscripted into clandestine struggles for survival.

Part three will then sample a number of these “messianic” survival arts and the various movements and alternative lifeways that made use of them at given moments of *historical* subversion. The range is adventitious, running from Celtic illuminated manuscripts to Provençal gilded relics, from Haitian possession-cult dramaturgy to Ecuadoran rain-forest shamanism, from Filipino revolutionary liturgy to Mexican street-procession. The genres of artful resistance examined include “Manuscript Illumination,” “Reliquary Embodiment,” “Possession Dance,” “Visionary Chant,” “Folk Poetry,” and “Street Theater,” each briefly “read” as a vernacular mode of engaging the messianic.

And finally, in a concluding chapter, we swing back up to contemporary Detroit and its prospects of reinventing itself as a new kind of urban-rural hybrid, reinserting a ten-thousand-year trajectory of unsustainable “development” (the city) back into a measure of accountable exchange with the ecology, which is the very matrix and “mother” of its continuing possibility—and doing so under tutelage and in time with the “Insurgent Beat” of an irrepressible hip-hop aesthetic. As originally conceived, the book would have devoted more time and detail to each of these examples gleaned from the history of Christian expansion around the globe. But in the actual writing it became apparent that sketching out the early career of the Jesus movement—from its origins in Hebrew struggle, through its Galilean phase, and into its change of context and focus in adaptation to the Roman Empire—would require much of the space available. In consequence, this third part is being offered as a kind of appendix in ebook format, at once addendum to the “thicker” analysis of the formative period of the tradition and prolegomena to a wider study of people’s movements and arts that it can only barely begin suggest.