From Douglass to Coates: Religion, Liberation and African American Autobiography

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of religion as a subject and formal device in male-authored African American autobiographies. The author applies this critical focus to three landmark texts in the black American literary canon: firstly, Frederick Douglass’s 1845 slave narrative entitled *Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*; secondly, James Baldwin’s 1964 essay ‘Down at the Cross’; and thirdly, Ta-Nehisi Coates’s 2015 memoir *Between the World and Me*. Through close reading of these texts and their contexts, the argument is presented that religion has been inextricably linked to the dialectical representation and discussion of the two contrasting themes “liberation” and “oppression” in black American autobiography. Furthermore, the claim is made that this evolution in the religious thematic has combined with post-structuralist shifts in authorial and autobiographical conventions. The author argues that this combination of influences has created a duality of conflicting literary conventions in contemporary male African American autobiography; one that has led to a crisis of identity and purpose within the genre. Coates’s *Between the World and Me* demonstrates this crisis of identity through its contradictory narrative drives: that of committing to traditional religious absolutism in defining liberation and oppression, and of eluding such final signification and judgment in a more impressionistic mode.
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African American slaves were liberated from their physical chains in 1865, following the end of the Civil War and abolition of slavery. Nonetheless, many African American Studies and Black Studies scholars uphold that that the cultural and unconscious oppressive mechanisms of slavery evolved in their forms and continue to function in the United States. In discussing these social mechanisms, scholars often draw on Foucauldian theory regarding the role of language in shaping and reinforcing discourse to gain and maintain power and control. In her seminal essay ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book’, for example, Hortense Spillers describes what she terms ‘the political program of European Christianity’ (70) in the fifteenth-century that created hierarchical linguistic distinctions between the self and the other in order to ‘dehumaniz[e]’ and ‘defac[e] … African persons’ (72) and legitimize the slave trade. For Spillers, therefore, the ‘project of liberation for African-Americans’ has involved the intertwined motivations of changing both behaviour and language to achieve this liberation (79).

In particular, black writers have needed to challenge and rewrite what Spillers describes as the ‘American Grammar Book’ (65) – that is, an American cultural coding system that has evolved to reinforce white dominance and superiority. bell hooks writes, however, in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, that in reality ‘little has changed’ over time in the negative representation of African Americans in the media; that these various outlets employ a symbolic language that still essentially functions on the basis of the ideology of white supremacy (1). This has, for hooks, become a system of ‘internalized racism’ that is perpetuated equally by white and black people, who have in their turn been forced to see and interpret the world according to racist ideological norms (1). African American Studies scholars therefore maintain that this struggle for control of the racializing power of language persists to this day.

This understanding of the unconscious power of language both to reinforce and resist racial oppression underpins this thesis. My methodology is one that situates individual African-American literary texts as both key influences on and reflections of a much broader racialized contest for semantic power and status. To explore this literary battleground, the thesis focuses in particular on the African American autobiographical mode. Slave narratives have been widely recognised as ‘the very generic foundation which most subsequent Afro-
American fictional and non-fictional narrative forms extended, refigured, and troped’ (Davis and Gates, ‘Introduction’ xxxiii). This thesis therefore positions the autobiographical imperative, as established by slave narratives, as a foundational literary mode for voicing the black American experience. The subgenre of African-American autobiography saw increased critical attention over the 1960s and 1970s. This has been ascribed to the publication of several especially powerful examples of black-authored autobiographies and the rise of Black Studies as a theoretical field (Weixlmann 415). Furthermore, Bergland asserts that ‘African American autobiographies have been central to interpreting the collective struggle of blacks and the ongoing resistance to oppression.’ (88-89). Bergland argues further that black autobiographical personas demonstrate a continuity between ‘exemplary rebels under slavery’ and later ‘revolutionary figures’ (88). This emphasis on the collective therefore unites historically diverse black autobiographers in the same literary endeavour of writing a more liberated future for African Americans.

In 1974, Stephen Butterfield separated African American autobiography into three distinct historical periods. The first of these, he called ‘the slave-narrative period’ from approximately 1831-1895; the second, ‘the period of search’ from 1901-1961; and the third, ‘the period of rebirth’, which spanned from 1961 until Butterfield’s time of writing. This thesis draws from these periods to identify three separate epochs in black American autobiographical writing. The first of these aligns precisely with Butterfield’s ‘slave narrative’ period covering 1831-1895, but my focus is purely on texts written in the antebellum era prior to 1865. The second is similar to his 1901-1961 ‘period of search’, exploring texts from the 1920-1930s Harlem Renaissance and 1950-1960s Civil Rights movement. The third explores the, as yet uncharacterised, present moment of African American autobiography as it stands in 2017. I discuss three texts roughly corresponding to each of these periods and that are generally considered to be important works in the African American autobiographical canon. The first of these is Frederick Douglass’s 1845 slave narrative entitled Narrative of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself; the second is James Baldwin’s 1964 civil rights era essay ‘Down at the Cross’ in The Fire Next Time, and the third is Ta-Nehisi Coates’s 2015 memoir Between the World and Me. I have chosen to dedicate each of the three chapters of this thesis to one of these texts and its associated criticism.

I am interested in the way that the above writers have, as Bergland put it, used the literary mode of autobiography to resist oppression. Another way of putting this is to call the texts liberation narratives, due to the central position that liberation occupies as both subject
and form of the texts. In this way, I identify a semantic binary split between the signifiers “liberation” and “oppression” – the one as negation of the other. Spillers’s aforementioned quote indicts Christianity in the racialized oppression of black Africans by white Europeans. Moreover, Spillers identifies the role of Christian binaries in denoting “otherness” within this project. Black African captors were held as negations of the Christian European; ‘pagan’ and ‘bestial’ when compared to their Christian, ‘civilised’ selves (Spillers 70). This suggests that the language of white supremacist ideology denies the possibility of faithful, black Christianity, as a means for reinforcing white dominance and black subservience.

As will be discussed further in Chapter 1, challenging this presumption of the inferiority of black religious faith became a crucial literary strategy within the abolitionist agenda of slave narratives. Douglass’s 1845 Narrative demonstrates an intense preoccupation with both claiming a legitimate Christian autobiographical identity and discrediting that of his slaveholding enemies. For Douglass and his slave narrator contemporaries, obtaining an autobiographical right to Christianity therefore served as a key weapon in fighting oppression. However, as the second chapter of this thesis explores, the early to mid-twentieth century saw a vast shift in this discourse. Baldwin’s 1964 ‘Down at the Cross’ demonstrates the increased twentieth-century black autobiographical imperative to challenge Christianity for its role in establishing and reinforcing racial oppression. Baldwin and other twentieth-century black writers therefore turned the figurative purpose of religion on its head, favouring a secular liberation theory to a Christianized one. It is this non-religious starting point that has been upheld as the root of Coates’s 2015 Between the World and Me, a point that I will discuss in more detail in Chapter 3. Nonetheless, all of these writers display the tendency to adopt religious language and metaphors when critiquing religion in this way.

The importance of religion as a topic of discussion in, and formal influence on, African American autobiographical writing has been discussed at length. However, very little has been done to try and make sense of the somewhat chaotic and often contradictory historical relationship, identified above, between religion and figurations of liberation and oppression in black autobiographical writing. This thesis, however, presents the claim that the religious thematic has served dialectically in black male autobiography, as a crucial literary basis for the construction both of narratives of religious liberation and religious oppression. Furthermore, I defend the notion that contemporary black male autobiography, as represented by Coates’s Between the World and Me, suffers a crisis of identity for its split commitment to the contradictory narrative drives of religious absolutism and post-structuralist plurality.
My three aforementioned primary texts serve as the main source material for achieving my thesis aims, and it must be noted that my three primary autobiographers are all male. This is a targeted and deliberate decision. It is a claim of my thesis, that the religious basis of male black autobiography has complemented a regime that has also served to degrade and objectify the female voice and body. Bergland writes that ethnic autobiographies, such as African American ones, and their criticism, have consistently and until very recently ‘assumed the male as universal subject’ (83). In agreement with this argument, I furthermore argue that the traditional, patriarchal methods of narration and characterization employed by these writers are indebted to religious sources. Furthermore, I suggest that the narrative silencing and objectification of female bodies is among the most pervasive legacies of the religious thematic in black, male autobiography, and the device which has seen the least change from Douglass’s to Coates’s historical contexts. Drawing mainly from male autobiographical sources in support of this point proves to be a fruitful exercise in uncovering their male bias in writing black liberation. The critical reverence attached to each of these writers enhances the realisation that this topic still continues to be ignored in discussion of black literature. I therefore uphold the claim that the religious imperative of African American autobiography has supported the liberation of the black male at the black female’s expense. Defence of this claim comes in the analysis of each of my primary texts in the chapters that follow.

There is a great deal of theory pertaining to the historical role of religion as a subject and a language of liberation and oppression in black American literature and culture. Historically, religion has been held to have the potential to both resist and reinforce racial oppression, depending on its societal and narrative deployment. This is often called a “dialectical” view of the relationship between religion and race, one that views it simultaneously as ‘a site of spiritual liberation and a source of social domination’ (Rabaka 121, emphasis in original). The role of religion in African American literature, especially the slave narratives, is often drawn from as evidence of this debate, as I will discuss further in Chapter 1. This theory therefore underpins the second of my thesis claims: that my three primary texts demonstrate a reliance on the dialectical potential of religion to support both liberation and oppression thematics in African American autobiography. The work of W. E. B Du Bois was highly influential in establishing this dialectical racialized theory of religion. Du Bois was deeply critical of American Christianity, famously calling it ‘the bulwark of American Slavery’ (qtd. in Stokes 83). In his 1903 text *The Souls of Black Folk*, he argues that its ‘doctrines of passive submission’ well suited the slave-masters’ aims and propaganda
However, as has been frequently pointed out, Du Bois’s criticisms were not aimed at Christianity per se, but at a Christianity that has been ‘(ab)used in the interest of Eurocentric-ideological-imperial domination and discrimination’ (Rabaka 120, parenthesis in original).

The contemporary scholars John Bartkowski and Todd Matthews therefore see religion as ‘both a blessing and a bane … in the pursuit of racial equity [because] the very same constellation of religious beliefs and practices that can be used to eradicate racial stratification can also be enlisted to reinforce it’ (163-164). They point out that religion can be responsible for ‘deepening racial prejudice and preserving racial privilege’ (174), but also a ‘valuable cultural tool in offsetting the adverse effects of oppression’ (166). Many theologians have therefore recognised this lattermost potentiality and sought to craft religion as a social narrative of liberation rather than oppression. James Cone’s 1969 book Black Theology and Black Power is seen as a key text in the mobilisation of this line of enquiry. In his book, Cone argued that the idea of Black Power could be found to align with Christianity rather than oppose it, and that the church should use the figure of Jesus as an emblem of the ‘suffering poor’ to forge this connection (1-2).

In 2013, Annalise Fonza called Cone “the father of black liberation theology”, and cited his role in causing many theological scholars to ‘rethink their theological assertions’ (189-190). For Fonza, Cone therefore developed a view of the God of the Bible as ‘the God of the Oppressed, not the God of the Elite’ (190). This enabled a positive view of the role of religion in black liberation. Dwight Hopkins argues that the ‘Christian liberation theme’, as influenced by the ‘spiritual salvation’ rhetoric of the Christian Bible, was central to the gradual empowerment and emancipation of African American slaves due to its clear overlap with ‘rhetoric surrounding secular liberation’ (Slave Theology 44). Furthermore, Hopkins asserts that the directness and honesty of black slave religion makes it an important and useful example of religious discourse more broadly (Introduction xvi-xvii). As such, Hopkins sees slave narratives as ‘foundational elements [in] the creation of a constructive black theology of liberation’ (Introduction xv) and outstanding and illustrious examples of black theological texts (xvii-xviii). Similarly, Coleman sees the slave narratives as empowering vehicles for the African American slave to ‘define their own relationships with the spirits, God, and other human beings’ (Coleman 96-97).

These critics therefore lay a greater weight on the “liberation” signification of the religious dialectic in black literature. However, some critics have taken up the “oppression”
side of the dialectic and looked to support the generation of an atheist or humanist black liberation narrative in response. Ta-Nehisi Coates, the author of my third primary text *Between the World and Me*, identifies with this atheist liberation struggle in a 2013 article entitled ‘The Myth of Western Civilization’. Here he argues that ‘history is a brawny refutation for [the argument] that religion brings morality’, and that those who reject ‘divinity’ and ‘order’ simply understand that ‘the stars can’t guide [them]’ and that ‘the only work that will matter, will be the work done by [them]’ (Coates, ‘The Myth’). Many critics have subsequently taken to viewing Coates’s *Between the World and Me* as an atheist liberation narrative, but this is a problematic categorization that I will come back to in Chapter 3.

Sikivu Hutchinson is perhaps a less problematic example of a contemporary black American atheist scholar who stands up for non-religious alternatives in the struggle for black liberation. We will discuss some of Hutchinson’s writing in more detail in Chapter 3, but it is worth additionally mentioning her 2011 book *Moral Combat* for the strong defence it makes of atheist values of social justice. Within the literary domain, Michael Lackey’s text *African American Atheists and Political Liberation* is a crucial source for this thesis. Lackey’s book represents one of the few texts that trace the secular liberation narrative across various historical African American theoretical and literary texts. Like such writers as Du Bois, Lackey holds religion to account for its role in justifying the oppression of African Americans (2). He notes also that this is what has provided the black atheist discourse with most of its fuel (3). Lackey therefore stands up for atheism as a site of liberation for African Americans, describing it as a ‘cause for hope’ (1) and presenting in his conclusion an ‘atheist manifesto’ for black literature (142). This text is therefore highly relevant in my discussion of the secular revolution in African American Autobiography and will be discussed more closely in Chapter 2.

Another central point in the discussion of this thesis is the problem of defining autobiography as a distinct genre. One needs only to turn to the entry on ‘autobiography’ in the *Oxford Companion to Literature* (7 ed.) to observe how unstable and slippery a form to define this has proven to be over time. The problem, as the *Companion* puts it, revolves around ‘the status of the subject and the nature of authorship’ (Birch). Traditionally, following its recognition as a genre in the late eighteenth century, the status of a text as “autobiographical” was based on the presumption that the ‘truthfulness’ of a text correlated straightforwardly with the author’s intention to be truthful (Birch). Another way of framing
this is to talk about a narrative being non-fictional or fictional, depending on whether the author intends to write a story that is true, or not true, respectively.

In the twentieth-century, post-structuralist literary critics started to criticise this assumption as being too straightforward in its perception of authorial truthfulness. Post-structuralist thinking instead underlines the blurred boundaries between truth and fiction in a text and suggests that the author is not in control of whether their text is read as the telling of a tale that is real or not real. In his important 1968 essay ‘The Death of the Author’, Roland Barthes argues, as the title suggests, for the ‘removal of the Author’ from the reading of any text (85, original capitalization) and seeing the text instead as ‘a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture’ (86). The difference that Barthes advocates is between the previous reading of texts as acts of ‘recording, notation, representation’ and the proposed emphasis instead on the ‘performative’ (85) – the act of writing as the rearrangement and presentation of a system of shared symbolic modes that denies the individual author any real agency beyond this.

Such thinking suggests, that if the author has no position in the text, the autobiographer has no more claim on an identity beyond the text than any fictional character; the extent to which an author’s written truths can be substantiated by historical fact is therefore not a valid part of the discussion. The *Companion* quotes Paul de Man’s assertion that this denies autobiography a separate generic existence beyond the realm of fiction (Birch), but it is also not fully able to deny autobiography the effect and quality normally associated with non-fiction. This evolution in the theory of reading autobiography is central to my thesis, because my selected texts represent historical epochs covering a time-span of close to 150 years and through the rise of post-structuralist thinking. I wish to pay some attention to how this affects the expectations for the form and genre of autobiography, as well as the changing social discourses that affect the themes that the texts address. It is my contention, that historical expectations for how an autobiographical text should be read played an important role both in the writing and reception of each of my texts. This is especially true when it comes to an increased scepticism as to the ability of a text to convey “the truth” to any extent, and the subsequent change in the way that authors and publishers speak to a cause as politically charged as African American liberation in the past and the present.

As autobiography proves to be such an unstable term, it is worth therefore justifying my own reasons for calling my selected texts autobiographical. Technically only two of my three texts, by Douglass and Coates, classify as full, book-length autobiographies in the
generic sense. Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’ is shorter and more often considered an essay. Nonetheless, I consider all three texts to share the same basic, autobiographical narrative mode. While they do vary from each other, they can be likened by their communication from the perspective of an extradiegetic, homodiegetic protagonist-narrator, who at once presumes the role of narrator, implied author and actual author. This autobiographer-narrator retrospectively retells and reflects on incidents from his life. I am less interested in the genuine non-fictionality of the events portrayed as in the autobiographical presumptions of the narrator; their speaking as though they are the author. By these definitions, all three of my primary texts share this autobiographical narrative mode. My use of the term ‘narrator’ to describe the written self of Douglass, Baldwin and Coates within their respective texts is therefore not to either confirm or deny the truthfulness of their accounts, but to respect the blurry post-structural definitions of fictionalized, performative truth-telling within the autobiographical form.

As mentioned above, all three of my primary texts also share the black autobiographical convention of speaking to a broader social purpose beyond that of the individual. I will demonstrate how this shared purpose can be called that of black liberation. The specific way that each author presents this, and the role of the religious narrative within this liberation narrative, varies from author to author. Detailing these narrative and contextual similarities and differences will form part of the connecting discussion between the three chapters. I therefore introduce certain relevant criticism pertaining to the specific texts and themes within each chapter. However, some critics and works are worth mentioning here in the thesis introduction due to their influence on, or broader relevance to, the subject at hand.

Let us turn, firstly, to the evolution of African American Studies as an independent theoretical field. I have already referenced two key texts authored by the highly influential critics Hortense Spillers and bell hooks: ‘Mama’s Baby’ and Black Looks. These raise crucial arguments in discussing the role of art and literature in reinforcing the cultural oppression of African Americans. Further demonstrative of Spillers’s role in addressing this problem in the poststructuralist context is her 2003 book Black, White, and in Color. The author Toni Morrison is also highly regarded for her contribution to African American Studies theory. Her 1992 text Playing in the Dark is of especial relevance to this thesis for its interrogation of the concept of whiteness as a culturally generated phenomenon. More historically, the writer Frantz Fanon is often ascribed a level of responsibility for helping to define African American Studies as a concrete sub-field from within a broader foundation in postcolonial studies. His
1952 text *Black Skin, White Masks* was particularly influential for its insights into the functioning of the colonial domination of African slaves on a psychological, as well as a material, level.

Perhaps in part due to the important role of the narrative mode in theorising the African American experience, non-academic African American authors have themselves become oft-cited commentators on the theory of African American Studies. This is especially true of Douglass and Baldwin, and their aforementioned texts that are being used as primary sources in this thesis. Beyond his 1845 slave narrative, Douglass’s later, 1855 autobiographical work *My Bondage and My Freedom* is often referenced for its discussion of American racist ideology. There are many other slave narratives that could be highlighted in this regard. However, Harriet Jacobs’s 1861 slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is worthy of especial mention due to its role in the feminist readdressing of black literature – which I will come back to in Chapter 1. Baldwin’s non-fiction is frequently cited as being influential on, and influenced by, the ideologies of the 1950s-1960s black Civil Rights movement. Important examples alongside *The Fire Next Time* include his early, 1955 essay collection *Notes of a Native Son* and his later, 1972 text *No Name in the Street*.

Of further import in a thesis such as this are the key figures held as responsible for reconstructing and redefining the status of autobiography in a poststructuralist context. I have mentioned Roland Barthes’s seminal 1968 essay ‘The Death of the Author’ already. In addition to Barthes, Jacques Derrida is widely influential for his role in complicating simple, binary understandings of authorial “truth” in literature. As an alternative, Derrida developed deconstructionist theories of multiplicity in the realm of literary signification. Robert Smith’s 1994 book *Derrida and Autobiography* offers useful insights as to the role of Derrida’s thinking on the form of autobiography specifically. Paul de Man wrote perhaps more directly about deconstructionist theory as it pertains to autobiography. His 1979 essay ‘Autobiography as De-facement’ is a key work in this theoretical field. The critic James Olney published several works that aimed to collect a variety of perspectives on autobiography in modern times. His 1980 book *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* is a particularly helpful collection, and one that also includes some essays on black autobiography within its scope. I will return to some of Olney’s specific thoughts on slave narratives as literary endeavours in Chapter 1.

Various critics and works have helped to shape a discussion of African American autobiography as an independent literary tradition and body of work. Much of this work
prioritises slave narratives, and so will be discussed further in Chapter 1. However, it is worth
drawing attention to such general works as Dexter Fisher and Robert B. Stepo’s 1979 essay
collection *Afro-American Literature*. This volume draws together like critical thinking on the
historical forms and functions of black literature, especially autobiography. The 1984
collection *The Slave’s Narrative*, edited by Charles Davis and Henry Gates Jr., provides an
acclaimed collection of essays on the autobiographical position and status of slave narratives
Collection of Critical Essays* contains many important essays by influential thinkers on the
subject of black autobiography. Collectively, these texts provide a useful overview of the
common trends in approaching black autobiographical traditions and conventions. Andrews’s
1986 book *To Tell a Free Story* is also pertinent to this thesis for its extensive exploration of
the theme of freedom – effectively synonymous with liberation – as a narrative imperative in
the slave narratives. Sidonie Smith’s 1974 book *Where I’m Bound* is a key influence on this
thesis for the same reason. In her book, Smith explores the collective representation of
freedom in black autobiography from the slave narratives and through the twentieth century.

Two specific articles on black autobiography are worthy of note for their thematic and
Can’ interrogates the thematic gendering of the concept of ‘liberation’ in black literature.
Burns explores the neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* to argue that it takes the traditional, male
figuration of liberation as “mastery” and refигures it in female terms as “agency”. In many
ways, Burns’s emphasis on gender can be seen as equivalent to my interrogation of religion as
a literary vocabulary for the theme of liberation in black literature. Nina Bosničová’s article
‘Changing Perspectives on Religion in African American Women’s Autobiographies’ covers
perhaps even more similar ground to that of this thesis. Bosničová discusses differences in the
representation of religion by three black female autobiographers from different periods –
Harriet Jacobs, Zora Neale Hurston and Maya Angelou. Bosničová’s essay, like this thesis,
also genders the historical mapping of religious form in black autobiography. However, its
primary sources are specifically female rather than male. Moreover, Bosničová’s article is not
one that takes into account broader cultural and literary evolutions in discourse to quite the
same extent. To its author’s knowledge, this thesis is the first of its kind to compare
Douglass’s, Baldwin’s and Coates’s texts with emphasis on the religious thematic in male,
African American autobiography.
Because my aim is to explore the evolution of this religious thematic, my thesis examines each of my selected texts and respective eras in chronological order. While my key aim for each chapter is to explore through close textual analysis the central position of the religious thematic in the primary texts, there will also be reference to other relevant, secondary work that illuminates given aspects of this representation. Where relevant, I also include comparative analysis of the key primary texts with other literary texts that are perceived to belong to the same genre – for example, Douglass’s *Narrative* with other slave narratives. The purpose of this is to highlight the power of the collective discussion of themes in African American autobiography. Through this methodology, the thesis will not only examine the representation of liberation within three texts, but speak to a broader situating of the theme within and across three interconnected literary epochs that offers some level of explanation as to its evolution.

Chapter 1 explores Douglass’s *Narrative* and the historical period of the antebellum American slave narratives. Here I discuss some key theory as to the individual and collective imperatives that underline the writing of the slave narratives. Most importantly, I put forward the reasons for seeing Christianity as a part of the literary strategy through which slave narrators wrote themselves status. I mainly discuss the literary qualities of Douglass’s *Narrative*, with reference to a small number of other slave narratives. In Douglass I find an overwhelming narrative emphasis on Christianity within the larger discussion of slavery. Moreover, I identify a variety of ways in which the author negotiates Christianity as a subject and formal device to achieve his desired narrative effects. Douglass’s *Narrative* is seen to draw on and combine the polarising conventions of sentimental fiction and Christian moral binaries to create a world of “good” and “bad” characters and behaviour. Furthermore, I suggest that these poles are unequivocally presented as revolving around the practice and ideology of American slavery. I therefore hold Christianity as a key weapon in Douglass’s political and narrative arsenal – for better or worse. While it is shown to be a useful method of presenting a clear and direct liberation narrative, I also argue that this may come at the expense of narrative fairness and breadth. Douglass’s *Narrative* therefore stands as a primary source for what will be discussed throughout the thesis as traditional, religious framings of polarized liberation and oppression in African American autobiography.

In Chapter 2, I turn to the second of my eras in the history of African American autobiography – the twentieth century – and the second of my primary texts – James Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’. The structure of this chapter differs slightly from that of the
first due to its difference in focus. Here I wish to discuss the secular revolution in black American autobiography as a collective endeavour across a wider spectrum of texts. As a result, slightly less space is dedicated to ‘Down at the Cross’ and more to several other important black autobiographical works that inform it historically. The first half of this chapter focuses exclusively on Baldwin’s essay, while the second addresses these other autobiographical texts. As in Chapter 1, the focus is on the relationship between religion and the representation of liberation in the texts discussed. I first present evidence to suggest that ‘Down at the Cross’ demonstrates a discursive shift from religion as a site of liberation to that of oppression, despite also demonstrating significant debts to Douglass’s religious liberation narrative. Thereafter I explore the way that the autobiographical texts published previously and contemporaneously with Baldwin’s essay can be seen to have influenced this shift towards representing religion as a site of oppression. My emphasis here is on the increased multiplicity of religious liberation discourse for African Americans in Baldwin’s time of writing, that led to a subsequent expansion in the figurative potential of religious prose in African American autobiography.

Chapter 3 of the thesis discusses my third historical literary period in African American autobiography – the present moment – and my third primary text – Ta-Nehisi Coates’s 2015 Between the World and Me. In this chapter, I draw on ideas and themes raised in the previous two chapters. However, the structure bears greater resemblance to Chapter 1 than Chapter 2, for its narrower focus on a single text and its related theory. I firstly scrutinise the frequent emphasis on Coates’s atheism, and ask how, and if, his text can be seen to constitute a movement away from the traditional, religious framing of liberation and oppression in African American autobiography. Part of my answer to this question comes from identifying Coates’s literary debts to both Baldwin and Douglass throughout the chapter; the ways in which Between the World and Me can be seen to draw on male traditions in writing about liberation of the black autobiographical self. Subsequently, I note that the text relies – more heavily than may be initially apparent – on the religious conventions of its literary precursors in discussing African American liberation and oppression. However, I also identify the ways in which Coates’s text eludes any straightforward and final commitment to either dialectical religious potentiality – as a site of either liberation or oppression. I link this circumstance to the joint, but only partial, commitment of the text to both the conventions of black, male autobiography and the expectations of post-structuralist autobiography. I argue
that these contradictions are never fully reconciled within the text, rendering it a narrative that suffers a crisis of identity in its conflicting narrative commitments.
Chapter 1: Frederick Douglass and Strategic Christianity

As an introduction to the religious thematic in African American autobiographical writing, this chapter deals specifically with slave narratives written in the antebellum era; that is, prior to the 1865 close of the American Civil War, that also saw the abolition of slavery. My discussion focuses mainly on Frederick Douglass’s 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. As a means of comparison, I make some reference to other slave narratives that were also published in Douglass’s era between 1830 and 1865. I also quote from some earlier, eighteenth-century British slave narratives to demonstrate significant stylistic influences these had on Douglass and on his contemporaries. This is all linked to an overall aim of showing how the religious thematic in these texts relates to the peculiar literary and political pressure the texts were under, and how this affects the way they were both designed and received. It can be said that this chapter therefore contributes in its small way to the broader historical-critical endeavour concerning slave narratives, that is, of exploring their status within that of autobiography, the history of American literature, and the African American literary tradition (Olney, ‘I was Born’ 149). Most significant in this chapter, though, is the way in which the religious thematic in slave narratives relates to these broader questions.

If the political, critical and literary history of the slave narrative could be ascribed a key theme, that theme could very easily be that of *authenticity*. This theme has manifested in a variety of ways, all of which, I would argue, are highly relevant to the social pressures and discourses surrounding the writing and reception of the narratives as a body of work. I aim to uphold, in this chapter, that this is specifically and especially relevant to the form and character of the religious thematic within the texts, again, both in terms of preceding writerly impulse and subsequent reader response. The decision to pay particular attention to Douglass’s *Narrative* is therefore a targeted one within the context of this debate. It is, first and foremost, arguably the slave narrative that has received the widest and most varied critical attention since its publication, and has therefore proved most instrumental in shaping critical discourses about the genre as a whole. It stands as an emblem of the slave narrative journey from oppression towards liberation, having now received classic status as a ‘literary
monument,’ as well as being perceived as a historical document after a troubled legacy in the century following its ‘heyday in the late 1840s and 1850s’ (Andrews and McFeely viii). Moreover, approaching the text by looking specifically at its relationship with the religious dimension proves to be a productive exercise. This has been carried out on many occasions by critics who venture to position the text according to such literary-religious generic couplings as the ‘spiritual autobiography’ and ‘conversion narrative’, among others that we will pay some attention to in the discussion that follows. Significant too though is the way in which Douglass inscribes religious identity into his autobiographical identity as a way of heightening its respectability. My claim is that in this way religion functions as a primary literary device by which Douglass attempts to make his story believable and his arguments persuasive.

The overwhelming critical consensus is that the driving purpose of any given slave narrative was to end slavery through the written appeal to a ‘principally … white readership’ (Fisch 2; quotation from Baker, Long Black Song 79). This is therefore also held as the ‘prime motivating force’ for Douglass’s work, including, of course, his Narrative (80). Slave narratives, individually and as a body of work, unforgivingly condemn, and call for the abolition of the slaveholding institution of the antebellum American South, an institution that was, at the time, a status-quo element of American society. It is therefore not entirely surprising that the wider American readership, who were for the most part, of course, far detached from the day-to-day realities of slavery, reacted not only with shock at the depravity portrayed in the texts, but with corresponding demand for verification of their “truthfulness”. In other words, to be taken seriously as valid political evidence towards the instigation of major social change, the texts faced extreme pressure to demonstrate that both their content and form were products of fact rather than fiction. This can be seen, therefore, as the primary subject of critical debate surrounding the study of slave narratives at the time of their publication, and, indeed, for many years to follow – the extent of their usefulness as ‘historiographical evidence of US slaveholding society’ (Barrett 416).

This historiographical critical preoccupation is traceable back to Olaudah Equiano’s 1789 text The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, which, despite dealing with the British, rather than the American, slave industry, is relevant to this discussion in that it is often hailed as ‘[t]he first truly notable book in the genre now known as slave narratives’ (Bontemps, The Slave Narrative xiv). Even in reasonably open-minded reviews responding to Equiano’s Narrative at the time, there is an underlying scepticism towards, we might even say
expectation of the impossibility of, independent literary African writing. One such example acknowledges the ‘general authenticity’ of Equiano’s account, but suggests the likelihood of assistance on the part of an ‘English writer’ in its creation, on the grounds that ‘it is sufficiently well written’ (qtd. in Davis and Gates, ‘Written by Themselves’ 5). Similarly, in relation to Ukasaw Gronniosaw’s 1770 Narrative, Banner discusses the common Enlightenment era procedure of ‘deploying white, male tribunals to verify the mental capabilities of African authors’. Such authors, Banner notes, therefore were required to not only testify to the facts of their own life-story, but also to ‘prove [their] ability to articulate the story on [their] own’, suggesting that the ruling idea was that African authors writing in English had to be ‘not only seen, but strictly examined, to be believed as viable human subjects who had the capacity to produce written art’ (298).

On a theoretical level, this scepticism connects to the presumption that racialized language functions in conjunction with social power; that white Europeans consciously or unconsciously wished to deny black Africans access to the written word because this kept them in a position of subordination. On a practical level, this discourse was valuable fuel to those aiming to discredit slave narrative authorship, and can be seen to have affected slave narratives in the antebellum United States too. The white author Lydia Maria Child, for example, was wrongly thought to have ghost-written both the Narratives of Douglass and Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl by Harriet Jacobs (McFeely 35). There is much to suggest that the struggle for authenticity is therefore very visible in the way that American slave narratives were written and published. The very creation of a self-authored slave narrative can be seen as a direct challenge to the typology of ‘an African slave [as] a brute without the capacity to write eloquently’ (Andrews and McFeely vii). The written format of the narratives is therefore strategically crucial, in that the process behind them assumes that literacy was indispensable within the contemporary moment, and therefore represented a route to self-expression, empowerment, and freedom (Barrett 418). For this reason, it is possible to take note of much literary evidence within the written form of slave narratives of the author showing their capacity to seize control of the written word that is acting as their vehicle of expression.

In a more general sense too, it has been suggested that the slave narratives make effective use of the contemporary reader’s expectations of the ‘dominant literary modes of representation’ of their time, namely ‘literature of sensibility and the sentimental novel’, to elicit the desired ‘physical, emotional’ response to support their collective cause (Barrett 424).
Moreover, expectations of readerly doubt can be seen as the motivation behind the proliferation of ‘paratextual material’—prefaces, introductions, and codas—that “framed” a slave narrative [and] most often functioned as an authoritative white verification of a black author’s intellectual abilities and good moral character’ (Banner 298). As this material was ordinarily arranged by white abolitionist editors, its function can be seen as to support the black slave author in professing his or her own authorial and intellectual legitimacy (298). The full title of Douglass’s *Narrative*, reading as it does *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, therefore not only states the author’s literacy, but demonstrates it, as Andrews and McFeely point out, by employing the standard nineteenth century format for ‘saying my book is mine and not as-told-to or ghost written’ (vii). These issues of content and form therefore work together in the literary sense of desired effect; combatting the presumption of inferior black intellectual capacity that would risk impairing their perceived truthfulness or authenticity. It can be said, then, that black American slaves took control of the written word as the first step to taking control of their identity and stepping out on the route to freedom (Olney 156-157). It is this thinking that is bound together in my denomination of slave narratives as liberation narratives.

The skill and success with which slave authors seized power and recognition through writing the self has therefore become increasingly critically admired. The act of ‘autobiographical self-fashioning’ has been described as a singularly appropriate, even natural response to American racism’ (Hooper 28) and especially important in the task of ‘recovering the self’ (Baker, *Long Black Song* 78-79). Douglass’s *Narrative* has also received particular attention in this regard; its classification as not only ‘a consciously literary work … of the first order’ (Baker, *Long Black Song* 77), but a landmark for other fugitives to similarly ‘represent their own literacy and authorship as products of the same heroic impulse to freedom that had allowed them to escape from chattel slavery’ (Hooper 28). As such, Douglass’s *Narrative* has been particularly praised within the black American slave narrative canon for the way that it illustrates ‘the black autobiographer’s quest for being’ (Baker, *Autobiographical Acts* 245). Many modern critics therefore began to discuss Douglass’s work primarily on an equivalent literary plane to other ‘great “I” narratives’ of his decade and only secondarily in regard to its relationship to the literary and political subject of slavery (McFeely 133). In the critical world, therefore, Douglass’s ‘unique angle of vision’, and handling thereof, positions him as one of the great black authors, his *Narrative* in ‘the realm of sophisticated literary biography’, and the narrator of said text as ‘something of a mythic figure’ (Baker, *Long Black Song* 78-79).
The importance of religion within slave narratives is therefore often viewed as a sub-strategy within the broader literary strategy of writing oneself status and freedom. It has been theorised that this may in part be due to that discourses and language surrounding Christianity usefully complemented the slavery debate in Victorian America. Giles suggests that evangelical Christianity served to broaden the moral question at hand in abolishing legal slavery, mystifying the idea of freedom to place it within the context of ‘the reclamation of an inner “soul”’, instead of considering any more complex issues regarding the reality of its achievement and afterlife. The debate therefore became for Giles ‘between good and evil’, resisting complicated intellectualism that could be seen as ‘elitist … obscurantism’ and ‘divert attention from “the plain moral sense of things”’ (58-59). It is noteworthy, then, that the abolitionist movement has been called a ‘religion’ in its own right (Thomas in Couser 59). This is interpretable in various ways, but we can assume that the symbolic link is framed in terms of devotion, loyalty, faith and, of course, the literal centrality of Christian values to those of the movement.

The appearance of Christianity as rhetorical strategy is therefore both pervasive and consistent across most slave narratives. The tenth chapter of Olaudah Equiano’s aforementioned eighteenth-century Narrative is particularly noteworthy in this regard. This finds the narrator in London, ‘determined to be a first rate Christian … [and] determined to work out [his] own salvation (135). He searches help from a variety of religious institutions, including ‘Quakers … Roman Catholic[s] … [and] Jews’ but fails to find the methods of securing the salvation he seeks (135). He outlines his inability to find ‘any at that time more righteous than [him], or indeed so much inclined to devotion’ (136). To the contrary, he finds that he ‘excelled many of them … by keeping eight out of ten [of the biblical Ten Commandments]’ (136). Here Equiano evidently wants to convince his reader that his autobiographical persona is both as willing and able as any white European to perform the duties of Christianity. He writes himself as a devout Christian; by inscribing his primary motive as the standard Christian aim of achieving spiritual salvation. Moreover, he marks out Christianity as symbol of status, ascribing a competitive edge to the quality of his own Christianity against that of other characters. In many ways, therefore, he replaces race with religion as a mark of status. While it is a physical impossibility for him to claim superior whiteness to white Europeans, he can claim a superior performance of the more abstract quantity of “religion”.

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Take also the *Narrative of Louis Asa-Asa: A Captured African*, another early slave narrative which appeared as a supplement to the *History of Mary Prince*. Here the voicing of Christian status comes through the overlapping voice of slave and editor which is so common in such dictated narratives. At one point, for example, the scribe outlines Asa-Asa’s love of God and the Bible, quoting with rare direct speech his joy at leaving his own country where ‘they have no God, no Bible’ and coming to Christian England (Pringle p. 41). The narrator subsequently adds their own support of this as evidence that African slaves are not ‘of an inferior nature’ as the slaveholding industry suggests (41-42). Again, this shows Christianity as a self-empowering narrative strategy in a slave narrative. Moreover, this example shows the linguistic interplay between a slave narrator and their abolitionist editor in shared motivation towards this goal. The writing of Christian narrative identity in early slave narratives was therefore a consistently exploited literary strategy in the broader agenda of abolishing the slave trade.

In many ways, this writing of Christian status is consistent across male and female slave narratives. Andrews writes with regard to the *Memoir of Old Elizabeth*, that black females in the antebellum South were not socially accepted as legitimate vehicles for the word of God. A great part, therefore, of the narrator’s affirmation of her own worth and identity for Andrews involves convincing herself that she has as much right to do ‘the work of the Almighty’ as any man, and that it was no man’s authority to resist what she saw as her legitimate Christian work (xxxvi-xxxvii). ‘Through evangelical Christianity’, writes Andrews, Elizabeth ‘found her own sense of “natural pride and self-importance”—and an empowering life’s work as well’ (xxxvii). In this way, despite the fact that the female slave narrator has further to travel on her path to freedom, with more and larger obstacles in her way, religion nonetheless functions on the same continuum as it does for her male counterpart. A legitimate claim to Christianity is a part of the legitimate claim to equal status citizenship with men and whites, and functions as a means of surmounting the claimed ownership of body and soul made by earthly white slaveholders in favour of the higher, heavenly right to this position. This reading of the female slave narrator’s Christianity sees it in the same narrative role as for male slave narrators. However, later in the chapter we will propose a reading that suggests subtle but important differences in the gendering of Christianity in male and female slave narratives.

It is therefore evident in various slave narratives that Christianity plays an important role within the abolitionist purpose of slave narratives. However, it has often been noted that
Douglass’s *Narrative* voices this Christian abolitionist ideal particularly effectively. Baker remarks that Douglass’s narrative was especially effective at voicing the ‘Protestant ethical base’ of the movement (*Long Black Song* 58). Moreover, Olney suggests that while Douglass’s rhetorical critique of slaveholding religious hypocrisy is an entirely ‘typical’ slave narrative feature (153), the skill with which he employs such strategies makes his *Narrative* at once ‘the best example’ and exceptional within the genre (154). One way in which Douglass has been said to align Christianity particularly effectively with abolitionism is in his exploitation of familiar religious literary tropes. Couser remarks, for example, that Douglass frames the unfamiliar quantity of slavery within the presumably familiar mode of the ‘conversion narrative’ to support his abolitionist cause (60-61). Specifically, Couser notes, Douglass exploits the analogy between the processes of conversion and liberation. However, the *Narrative*, Couser argues, also reveals the influence of the Bible and ‘sermon rhetoric’, as well as ‘abolitionist oratory’ on the slave narratives in general – as well as that of Douglass’s own ‘experience of slavery [and] of the antislavery movement’ (51). This is also, for Couser, very visible in Garrison’s preface to the *Narrative*, which uses language associated with ‘revival preaching’ designed to ‘awaken the reader from his spiritual lethargy … and to convert him to the abolitionist cause’ (59). This trope therefore figures slavery as a ‘state of sin or existence in Hell’, and freedom as ‘grace or Heaven’, and liberation as religious conversion (53). Couser argues that this occurs with such consistency as to suggest its conscious literary strategic application (53).

As well as the organising principles of the conversion narrative, Couser suggests that Douglass’s narrator takes on both an experiential, autobiographical perspective and a prophetic, ‘supramundane’ one, through ‘patterns of spiritual autobiography’ (53). Baker argues that this adoption of such an American tradition as that of spiritual autobiography aligns Douglass with such great white writers as Cotton Mather, Benjamin Franklin and Henry Adams (*Long Black Song*, 78). Andrews also highlights the ‘structural and metaphorical features’ that lead to the *Narrative*’s frequent recognition as a spiritual autobiography. He highlights particularly the middle chapters of the *Narrative* that outline the narrator’s ‘resurrection’ and subsequent teaching of Christianity as a positive narrative of freedom (*American Jeremiad* 159-160). However, Andrews also frames the *Narrative* in terms of the ‘American Jeremiad’ genre, a form of autobiographical writing that ‘foretold America’s future hopefully, sustained by the conviction of the nation’s divinely appointed mission’ (‘American Jeremiad’ 157). It is therefore, for Andrews, a ‘political sermon’ that
associates with the American jeremiad form to support Douglass’s claim to being ‘of the people’ and therefore to justify and centralize his critique of slavery (160-161). Specifically, Andrews holds that Douglass’s rhetorical aim is to subvert the perceivably corrupt American discourses that have arisen as a result of slavery’s ‘perversions of the true oppositions between good and evil, the natural and the unnatural’ (166). In this way, his appeal to ‘Christianity proper’ over the ‘slaveholding religion’ that he figures as its binary opposite, aligns with other binary appeals to the reinstallation of ‘the symbolic American ideal’, such as that of wealth over deprivation and order over violence (165). The recognition, in Douglass, of the literary patterns of the conversion narrative, the spiritual autobiography and the American jeremiad are all useful in understanding Douglass’s alleged effectiveness in combining Christian and abolitionist literary mores. It is also clear that praise has been directed towards his application of Christianized narrative modes as a means to convey the moral necessity of abolishing slavery. For these reasons I class Douglass’s *Narrative* as not only a liberation narrative but as a religious liberation narrative, due to the prominence of the religious mode in Douglass’s narrative expression of liberation.

Let us explore in more detail Douglass’s application of strategic Christianity in his *Narrative*. Douglass’s self-authored appendix usefully introduces this analysis, as it encapsulates both Douglass’s message as regards Christianity and his literary means of framing this throughout the preceding narrative. He identifies the purpose of this final chapter as that of ‘remov[ing] any misapprehension’ as to his religious views (75); more specifically, to clarify his position on what he terms ‘Christianity proper’ and ‘the slaveholding religion of this land’, as well as his loyalty to the former and condemnation of the latter (75, emphasis in original). That this final chapter focuses on this clarification suggests that Christianity occupies a central position in Douglass’s wider argument. The implication is that this is a summary of the narrator’s argument and worth paying even more heed than the rest of the text. The fact that Douglass titles this final chapter as an ‘Appendix’ heightens its status as “conclusion” a therefore heightens its importance in a structural sense.

Douglass also takes the opportunity offered by this structural shift to shift his narrator’s narrative perspective. He indicates this change immediately with the phrase ‘I find, since reading over the foregoing Narrative’ (75). An autobiographer is arguably already extradiegetic, retelling the story of his or her life from outside of the narrative itself. However, here we find a narrator in Douglass’s appendix, who has granted himself an increased wealth of hindsight; an editor-autobiographer who stands even further from the text than the
The autobiographer of the main narrative. The implication is that his meta-narrative position grants him increased authority through hindsight and reflection. It is possible that by moving its narrator to an advanced and more authoritative, reflective narrative moment in time Douglass is even attempting to elevate the authority of this appendix to that of the extra-textual endorsements of his abolitionist sponsors.

Douglass uses this new narrative platform to reiterate how his central arguments regarding true and false Christianity are realised in the context of the slaveholding South. It is evident here, that part of Douglass’s narrative clarity and power comes from his propensity for dividing meaning into binaries. In this case, the ‘good, pure, and holy … Christianity of Christ’ is set as polar opposite to the ‘bad, corrupt, and wicked … Christianity of this [Southern, slaveholding] land’ (75). He polarises his characters in the same way, here and throughout the rest of the narrative, grouping religious slaveholders into one homogenous group of Christian hypocrites. In the appendix, Douglass filters this polarised characterization of goodness and wickedness down to the individual level, depicting a land filled with ‘men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members’, who would ‘sell [the narrator’s] sister for … prostitution’, while posing as ‘the pious advocate of purity’ (75). Such language in the appendix effectively introduces the way that Douglass uses Christian morality to complement polarised characterisation in the rest of the text. I will go into more detail shortly about how this stereotypical typical approach to characterization, especially as regards slaveholders and women, relates to Douglass’s broader narrative strategy to align the narrative of Christianity with his own narrative of slave liberation.

While condemning characters that he brands as religious hypocrites, Douglass also adapts his own language use to demonstrate his legitimate access to Christianity in its uncorrupted form. A good example is the paragraph in which he likens the ‘votaries’ of American Christianity to the ‘ancient scribes and Pharisees’, and quotes directly from the biblical book of Matthew to support his argument (77). This in itself demonstrates biblical knowledge and therefore enhances the credibility of his claim to pure Christianity. However, Douglass also demonstrates his ability to use language and imagery that aligns with this archaic, sermonic mode. He creates his own religious metaphors, casting religious slaveholders as ‘devils dressed in angels’ robes’ and the Christian slaveholding industry itself as ‘hell presenting the semblance of paradise’ (76). Douglass then concludes this appendix with a parodic poem which translates much of this polarising Christian rhetoric as to the
hypocrisy of religious slaveholders into verse form. I would argue, and will expand upon this assertion below, that in many ways this decision to adopt the poetic form functions in a similar way to the decision to use biblical form and allusion. Douglass is demonstrating his knowledge and ability to apply writerly conventions that are seen as desirable markers of authority and respectability. He inscribes his own status through the effective negotiation of Christian and prosaic discourse simultaneously. A cursory glance at the Narrative’s appendix therefore serves to support the notion that the text as a whole positions freedom ‘in a Christian context’ (Baker, Autobiographical Acts, 250). The narrator’s liberated self identifies firmly with the Christian values of his oppressors, both explaining and justifying this peculiar allegiance with care and attention (Baker, Autobiographical Acts 250).

Let us expand this idea in relation to the text as a whole. As in the appendix, much of Douglass’s criticism of slaveholding religion in his wider narrative is explicitly expressed. Douglass’s narrator openly denounces the logic of the scriptural pro-slavery argument that ‘God cursed Ham, and therefore American slavery is right’ by noting how many slaves at his time ‘owe[d] their existence to white fathers … most frequently their own masters’ (14). Moreover, Douglass frequently criticises in plain terms the hypocrisy of those who express Christian devotion, while still owning and abusing slaves. The ‘religion of the south’ is referred to as ‘a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, - a justifier of the most appalling barbarity, - a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, - and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection’ (53). Douglass asserts that religious slaveholders are ‘the worst’ of all slaveholders; the ‘meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly’ (53). Much of Douglass’s Narrative therefore demonstrates the same explicit confrontation of hypocritical slaveholding religion as that of the appendix.

However, I asserted above that Douglass also sculpts a respectable Christian autobiographical persona in the appendix through his choices of language and modes of expression. There are instances in the text, where these mechanisms visibly perform this desired self. Take for example the passage in which he recalls his own feet, ‘so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which [he] is writing might be laid in the gashes’ (26). This imagery sharply reminds the reader of the dual persona of Douglass as authoritative, literate narrator and Douglass as abused, oppressed slave. Baker cites this as an example of the way in which Douglass reminds his reader of his presence as ‘the shaping agent and intellect of the
text’ behind the ‘brutalized chattel’ self that he embodies within it (Barrett 433). Both of these self-characterizations are important within the overall effect of the text.

The latter representation is important in its use of the emotional component of sentimental novels to elicit sympathy for the stereotypical slave, as we discussed earlier in the chapter. We will expound this angle further as regards the victimization of female characters in the text. However, the shaping agent and intellect persona is important too, as it aligns Douglass with other writers of power and status who are worth listening to and taking seriously. Douglass’s negotiation of known literary forms and conventions therefore works together with his use of the language of Christian respectability to enhance the authority of this autobiographical persona. Even when his classical references are not directly biblical, they therefore work within the same literary project of performed self-enhancement. Note his quoting of Shakespeare’s Hamlet to describe the mind-set of the slaves while planning their escape as another example (57). The choice of Shakespearean language is a deliberate literary attempt to align the consciousness of his slave characters with a language of thinking deemed elevated and respectable to his audience.

At notable junctures in the narrative, Douglass seems to revel in conscious literary elevation of his prose. One key example is what Douglass describes as ‘an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships’ at Chesapeake Bay (46). The autobiographer recalls this passage through an extended, and, for Douglass, rare instance of direct speech. It would thus be expected that the passage would be intended to read more mimetically, closer to actual quotation, than the surrounding diegesis. Despite the autobiographer’s claim to expressing himself in a ‘rude way’, however, the actual passage is crafted with one of the loftiest registers in the whole text. The tone of the passage carries a prayer-like quality. Douglass implores God to ‘deliver’ him and to help him be free, thus reinforcing the common slave narrative thematic connection between spiritual deliverance and material liberation. Most significant in the form of this language, though, is its debt to the literary stylings of romantic poetry.

This borrowing is firstly evident in the use of sublime imagery to act as stimulus for literary expression; for Douglass, this role is played by the ‘beautiful vessels, robed in purest white’ (46). The awe and magnificence of this sight then emotionally moves Douglass, the romantic “I”, to such an extent as to ‘compel utterance’. The utterance that follows is then ascribed an exclamatory quality, containing many smaller apostrophes often prefixed with “O” and punctuated with an exclamation mark. Such examples include ‘O that I were free!’,
‘O God, save me!’ and simply ‘Alas!’ (46). This language is also embellished with typically romantic and dramatic polarising metaphors to provide contrast. Douglass depicts liberty as ‘the gentle gale’ and ‘swift-winged angels’, and the oppression of slavery as ‘the bloody whip’ and ‘bands of iron’. In this instance, therefore, Douglass unashamedly exploits the classical, elevated forms of romanticism and prayer to exaggerate the quality of language presented as that of the narrator’s everyday speech. This is therefore a very pointed and explicit show of literary authority through the adoption of high-status form and language.

Douglass frequently uses direct biblical analogies and references, as well as more off-hand Christianized turns of phrase, to the same effect. He likens the wealth of Colonel Lloyd, for example, to that of the biblical character Job (21). Similarly, he ascribes his good fortune in being selected to go to Baltimore as ‘a special interposition of divine Providence in [his] favor’ on two occasions (28, 36). The upper case “P” emphasises the divine component. Furthermore, Douglass describes his optimism about his own future emancipation from slavery as ‘a spirit of hope … from God’ (28). Later he prefixes gratitude for the help of Mr. Ruggles with the expression ‘[t]hank Heaven’ (70). These examples are often subtler and delivered with a lighter touch than those in the text’s appendix and aforementioned romantic apostrophe, but they can be seen as equally important to the elevation of the autobiographer’s status.

The effect is that of dissolving the Christian consciousness, through seemingly casual narrative expressions, into Douglass’s rhetoric. This gives the impression that this Christian consciousness functions unconsciously for the narrator; that it enters his worldview without him even trying. One example of this kind of language demonstrates the overlap between Douglass’s explicit scriptural quoting and his implicit embedding of such language into his own narrative. Referring to the cruel treatment of his slave grandmother, Douglass’s narrator asks: ‘[w]ill not a righteous God visit for these things?’ (38). However, he later poses the same question as though quoted from the Lord directly, ‘shall I not visit…’ (78, emphasis added). This re-figuration of the same biblical material reveals Douglass’s conscious literary efforts to include scriptural rhetoric into his narrative despite the impression of narrative effortlessness.

One of the more subtle ways in which Douglass instates his literary authority over his enemies is through the use of irony. These ironic judgements are often made with respect to the poor treatment of slaves by individuals or groups, and Christianity is often the pivot around which this ironic judgement rotates. He sardonically notes, for example, that ‘it is
almost an unpardonable offence to teach slaves to read in this Christian country’ (32). Here he therefore ironically mocks America as a whole for its claim to Christian values, while neglecting the rights of its slave population to literacy. Similarly, the narrator casts ironic criticism over what he calls ‘the state of things in the Christian city of Baltimore’ for the racism he experiences within its citizenship and legal system (64).

At the individual level, Douglass uses irony to undercut the Christian morality of slaveholding masters. He refers to Thomas Auld, for example, as ‘one of many pious slaveholders who hold slaves for the very charitable purpose of taking care of them’ (42). Furthermore, Mr. Covey’s ‘reputation as a “nigger breaker”’ is ironically cast as being strengthened by his being ‘a professor of religion – a pious soul’ (42, emphasis in original). In all of these examples, it is evident that the adoption of an ironic tone is helpful to the narrator’s successful argument of a point of view. Firstly, the presence of the irony is subtle and therefore avoids overt confrontation and the risk of alienating the reader. Secondly, this same ironic subtlety provides increased reward for the reader in recognising its presence, thereby connecting reader and narrator in shared understanding of the textual witticism. Thirdly, this shared point of understanding connects the reader with the narrator’s fundamental criticism of the subject at hand. There is more to say on this, but most noteworthy for my analysis is that the subject of Douglass’s ironic critique is so frequently the contradictory and inconsistent Christian morality of his characters.

It is also worth mentioning, following discussion of the purpose of Douglass’s subtle irony, that his aforementioned employment of elevated language and literary forms to convey meaning also functions to convey more controversial arguments or criticisms. Note, for example, that Douglass uses the cover of his romantic apostrophe to express a rare instance of religious doubt, asking ‘[i]s there any God?’ (46). Later in the narrative, he also expresses similar doubt by quoting through direct speech his own narrative voice asking ‘[d]oes a righteous God govern the universe?’ (55). Importantly though, this latter example is also inscribed in heavily sermonic rhetoric that speaks of ‘smit[ing] the oppressor’ and ‘deliver[ing] the spoilt out of the hand of the spoiler’ (55).

Like the form of romantic poetry in the former example, here the sermonic mode lends a heightened authority to views that could be too shocking to be phrased within the plain anecdotal mode of the autobiographer. This turns radical views into more conventional ones by expressing them in ways that are discursively recognised as trustworthy; with the language of status and respectability. This is important, because, as a text designed to achieve the
abolition of slavery, Douglass’s *Narrative* is obliged to deal with radical, potentially destabilising material. By showing mastery of authoritative and respected forms, however, the narrator is able to present such radicalism in the language of conservatism. Mastery of the language and form of Christianity functions in such a way for Douglass, allowing him to express slave liberation as not only an acceptable theme, but one as much a part of status-quo morality as the Christian understanding of universal love. The literary conventions of Christianity therefore provide one example of the many ways in which Douglass manipulates the language and form of his narrative voice to elevate the argument for anti-slavery at the same time as degrading that of his slaveholding enemies.

Douglass therefore employs various literary strategies in shaping and sculpting a productive, Christian autobiographical persona. However, I mentioned above in discussing the text’s appendix that his polarised representation of other characters in his story is also crucial to his broader literary aims. Let us first look at one side of Douglass’s Christianized binary of judging moral character, that of the stereotypical, hypocritical Christian slaveholder. Throughout the text, Douglass expounds on the wickedness of several such characters, most often his slaveholding master at a given point in the autobiographical narrative. Nevertheless, the homogenization of these characters as inferior Christians remains consistent. The emphasis in Douglass’s characterization of the overseer Mr. Severe, for example, is on his ‘cruelty and profanity’ (17). Douglass makes this ‘fiendish barbarity’ vivid by providing detailed physical description, such as that of the ‘blood run[ning] half an hour at the time’ from a whipping victim’ (17). The same device of physical vividness is applied to Mr. Severe’s profanity, which the narrator describes as ‘enough to chill the blood and stiffen the hair of an ordinary man’ (17). His death is therefore framed within the Christianized language of ‘merciful providence’ for the slaves (18). Similarly, the ‘savage barbarity’ of the overseer Mr. Gore is exemplified in the narrative by his cold-blooded murder of Demby the slave (23-24). This act, Douglass’s narrator asserts, stains the soul of Mr. Gore ‘with his brother’s blood’ (24).

These slaveholder characters and the short narrative space devoted to their characterization, therefore exist almost purely as examples of the negative side of the Christian binary. Their names, Severe and Gore respectively, are almost too conveniently descriptive of their personalities to be believed as autobiographically truthful. As such, they form clear, unambiguous polarized figurations of the unchristian tendencies of slavery.

However, as I mentioned in my discussion of the appendix, Douglass’s main criticism of
slaveholding religion is that of its hypocrisy; its corruption of an otherwise pure ideal. Couser argues that in this way Douglass’s literary-religious strategy is ‘a double edged sword’, with which he both condemns slavery through Christian values and uses his experience of slavery to criticize some aspects of contemporary American Christianity (53). Douglass’s own religious thematic argument is therefore that ‘Christianity was nominal, and hence hypocritical, if it did not include the belief that slavery was a sin’ (Couser 60).

This argument is evident in some of Douglass’s more extended critiques of slaveholding characters. They are painted not as unchristian, but as hypocritical Christians, and therefore even more despicable people. The cruelty of Mr. Covey, for example, comes from his ‘power to deceive’ (44). This complements a characterization that very much associates him with the devil. His cunning was such, Douglass informs us, that the slaves referred to him as ‘the snake’ (44). However, Peyser notes that Douglass also portrays Covey in Christ-like terms by phrasing his deceptive tactics with the expression ‘like a thief in the night’; a characterization of Jesus from the biblical text 1 Thessalonians (Peyser 88).

Douglass notes that ‘few men would at times appear more devotional than [Covey]’, but that in truth his religion was made to ‘conform to his disposition to deceive’ (44). Covey, Douglass informs his reader, at once ‘seemed to think himself equal to deceiving the almighty’ (44) and was able to deceive himself into thinking that he was ‘a sincere worshiper of the most high God’ (45). However, Douglass’s narrator is anxious to show the truth behind Covey’s lies. He emphasises, for example, the latter’s lack of natural ability to sing independently during ‘family devotions’, and his reliance instead on Douglass as cover (44-45).

This lack of natural ability to sing hymns seems to serve as a symbol for the lack of true religious feeling behind Covey’s pretence. Similarly, Douglass refers to the hypocrisy of Covey in acting as a loyal Christian, while compelling his first slave to ‘commit the sin of adultery’ (45). Perhaps the most developed of all of Douglass’s wicked slaveholder characterizations is that of Master Thomas Auld. The majority of the ninth chapter of Douglass’s Narrative is devoted to discussing Auld’s character; a character, in Douglass’s words, ‘destitute of every element … commanding respect’, with ‘meanness’ as his ‘leading trait’ (39). A large part of Douglass’s purpose in underlining Auld’s despicable character seems to be to point to the ineffectiveness of the Christian conversion process in changing this. Hoping that Auld’s conversion might make him ‘more kind and humane’, the narrator finds instead that this process actually made Auld ‘more cruel and hateful’ (40). The narrator
explains this by arguing that ‘[p]rior to [Auld’s] conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty’ (40).

This critique of Auld’s character includes the suggestion that conversion to Christianity can be fundamentally worse than acting without it. In this, Douglass skirts dangerously around blasphemy, but avoids it by reminding his reader that his view of Christian virtue from such a character. As long as he owns and mistreats slaves, therefore, Captain Auld’s ‘pretensions to piety’ serve not to better his character, but to degrade it even further (40). Douglass therefore skilfully separates genuine Christian faith and hypocritical pretence of the same faith, placing two apparently similar concepts at opposite ends of a moral scale. This allows him to both avoid blasphemy and strengthen his assault on the morality of slaveholding. Captain Auld’s characterized realization of Douglass’s most sophisticated attack on the hypocrisies of slaveholding religion therefore also makes him the most despicable of all of the text’s slaveholding villains.

As well as casting religious slaveholders as the sentimental villains of his piece, Douglass provides the contrast of corresponding tragic victims. I mentioned previously how Douglass’s autobiographical focalizer often casts his own former slave self as innocent victim, scarred by the villainy of slavery. This is a consistent device throughout Douglass’s story, and especially pronounced at the opening of the narrative in which the narrator outlines his childhood years. Here Douglass employs pathos by highlighting the estrangement between himself and his mother, as a result of the separation practiced by his slave owners. This practice, Douglass suggests, is designed to ‘blunt and destroy the natural affection of the mother for the child’ (13). The result, in Douglass’s case, causes him to ‘[receive] the tidings of her death with much the same emotions [he] should have probably felt at the death of a stranger’ (13). The implication from the outset of Douglass’s Narrative, then, is that slavery destroys or hinders ideals held to be natural and pure, such as the natural bond between mother and child. Douglass immediately takes this up as a literary theme, and shows his willingness to cast himself and his fellow slaves as representatives of the pure, natural opposition to the corrupt villainy of slavery.
Douglass and other slave characters in the narrative therefore represent the pure, unadulterated side of the Christian binary in the same way that slaveholders represent its corrupt, hypocritical converse. The Christianity of these slaves is written in such a way as to reflect this purity. Especially exemplary of this point is Douglass’s retelling of the songs sung by his fellow slaves. Douglass’s narrator emphasises the automatic, improvised quality of these songs, asserting that ‘they would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune’ (18). Nonetheless, assures Douglass, these songs ‘breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains’ (19). Douglass therefore writes slave faith as natural, heartfelt and uncorrupted.

Furthermore, he presents slave piety in such a way that draws together spiritual deliverance and material slave freedom as one and the same process. His characterization of slave characters therefore aligns with his wider representation of Christianity proper. In other words, the purity of slave religion in Douglass’s Narrative is as unequivocal as the corruption of that of his slaveholders. The minor character Mr. Cookman serves to demonstrate the thematic link in the text between respectable Christian morality and the freedom of slaves. Douglass speaks unusually highly of Mr. Cookman, considering that he is a ministerial associate of the aforementioned despicable slaveholder Thomas Auld. Cookman is, Douglass asserts, a ‘good man’ and loved by the slaves at the house (41). The root of such praise is, significantly, that Cookman is believed to be involved in the emancipation of all slaves (41). This seemingly anomalous example of characterization therefore serves in fact to reinforce Douglass’s binary construction of Christianized good and evil operating around the singular pole of slavery.

Slaveholders and slave characters are therefore generally polarised as villains and heroes in Douglass’s Narrative according to cultural codes of respectable Christianity. We might put it that Douglass autobiographically exploits these real-life characters by making them perform Christianized narrative roles that suit his wider purpose of supporting the abolition of slavery. If we look at the text in this way it is notable that Douglass also seems to exploit male and female characters in different ways. In her 1991 essay ‘In the First Place’, Deborah McDowell argues that critical scholarship has historically masculinized slavery, and that this has related strongly to ‘the process and production of Douglass as “the first” [slave/slave narrator]’ (172, emphasis in original). However, McDowell argues that this pattern of prioritising Douglass has been at the expense of Douglass’s female slave
McDowell’s argument therefore implies that ‘Douglass’s freedom – narrative and physical alike – depends on narrating black women’s bondage; he achieves his “stylistic signature” by objectifying black women’ (177, emphasis in original). In supporting this point, McDowell draws attention to the frequency of female whippings in Douglass’s Narrative, and in particular that of his Aunt Hester (McDowell 176-178). The latter event is significant, for McDowell, for its role as ‘spectacle … exhibition’ (178). Furthermore, McDowell highlights the narrative silencing of female characters in the text; the act of ‘[excluding] women from language’ (182). McDowell cites, for example, Jugurtha’s observation that ‘[m]onologue functions as dialogue’ in Douglass (McDonnel 182). McDowell argues that in such characterizations as that of Mrs. Auld and Douglass’s own mother, this leads to a narrative ‘erasure of the feminine’ in the text through Douglass’s mono-focalized autobiographical portrayal of these characters (182).

In addition to these points, I would like to suggest that my previous discussion regarding sentimental, Christianized characterisation is also relevant in highlighting Douglass’s exploitation of the female voice and body in his Narrative. In particular, female characters in the Narrative often fulfil the role of the pious, humble and innocent; established as stereotypes of passive Christian morality. More importantly, they are also weak and easily abused, strong in spiritual faith but passive and helpless against the physical abuses of slavery. In addition to what I noted previously about Douglass’s use of his mother’s death as a device to elicit sympathy for both characters, it is significant that he inscribes her passing as being ‘called … suddenly away’ (13). This subtle but important choice of words gives the event spiritual meaning. On one level, it implies the shared Christian faith of both narrator and character as regards the afterlife; the belief that there is a space reserved in heaven for Douglass’s mother. However, the phrase ‘called away’ also suggests that her entire being is designed for this purpose; that her entire function in the material realm of the narrative is to serve as a spiritual metaphor for deliverance from the cruelties of slavery. As all of this passage is posed from Douglass’s perspective, we can align the narrative exploitation, or objectification, of the mother’s femininity with the Christian moral stereotyping of all of his characters. Rather than allowing the character literary space to breathe, speak and live on her own terms, Douglass writes his mother’s death as a religious sacrifice to his abolitionist cause. As well as casting his mother as a stereotypically tragic victim, Douglass claims her
body and voice as his own material to support his claim to legitimate Christian identity and freedom from slavery.

Leading on from McDowell’s comments on the spectacle of female whippings in the text, it is also relevant that these exhibitions are witnessed in Christian moral terms. As regards the beating of Aunt Hester, for example, Douglass figures this as ‘the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery’ (15). Here the blasphemy of the slaveholder and purity of the female victim align with Douglass’s sentimental literary purposes yet again. Douglass emphasises the ‘horrid oaths’ of the master (15) and ‘prayers’ of the victim (14). Aunt Hester is therefore doubly stereotyped as pious, innocent slave and powerless female victim. However, Douglass reveals in his telling of this event that his loyalties lie with the rights of the slave rather than the rights of a woman in enjoying freedom from physical abuse. Douglass suggests that his reader may perceive that his master is displaying the ‘virtue’ of ‘protecting the innocence’ of Aunt Hester through the act of beating her, as may be expected from any ‘man of pure morals’. However, assures Douglass, this is not the case, the master is in fact acting on his own ‘infernal purpose’ (15). The suggestion is that Christian morality justifies the beating of women but not the beating of slaves. As such, Douglass once again makes clear here his willingness to sacrifice the female body to his wider rhetorical and political purpose. For Douglass, it is as much a man’s moral duty to fight for the liberation of all slaves, as it is to ensure that women are kept in a generally subservient position within this liberated society. Douglass’s interpretation of Christian moral duty therefore supports his gendered understanding of justice and liberty.

With regards to McDowell’s assessment of the silencing of Mrs. Auld, it is also evident that Douglass bounds this up with characterising her behaviour according to Christianized expectations of female propriety. As is typical with all of his characters throughout the text, Douglass’s characterization of Mrs. Auld’s behaviour is almost entirely contingent on her treatment of slaves. As is also typical, such behaviour is supported by gendered Christian depictions of good and evil accordingly. When acting sympathetically towards slaves and demonstrating the “good” side of the binary, Mrs. Auld’s face is metaphorically figured as ‘made of heavenly smiles’ (29). At these times, the narrator reports of the ‘simplicity of her soul’, calling her a ‘pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman’ (31). However, ‘[u]nder its [slavery’s] influence’ (31), Douglass asserts that Mrs Auld’s ‘angelic face gave place to that of a demon’ (29). The ‘tender heart … [and] … lamblike disposition’, that looks favourably on slaves gives way to ‘a tiger-like fierceness’ as callous and dismissive
as any other male master towards the slaves under their charge (29). Douglass’s Christianized ideals for female behaviour are evident here; piousness, simplicity of soul and tenderness of heart. His biblical metaphorical binaries of angel and demon, lamb and tiger reinforce these culturally feminine ideals. However, most crucial here is the multi-faceted narrative repression of Mrs. Auld’s agency and self-expression. Douglass’s narration dominates and overrides her voice, as noted by McDowell and Jugurtha above, while her character pivots entirely around her attitude to slavery and conformity to Christianized female behavioural expectations. These three forces – slavery, Christianity and Douglass’s own dominant narration – therefore work together in silencing the female voice in Douglass’s Narrative.

This reading implicates Christianized language and metaphor as part of the literary machinery through which Douglass casts black slave women ‘almost totally as physical bodies, as sexual victims’ to their white, male masters (McDowell 176). McDowell cites France Foster in observing that female slave narratives demonstrate a different pattern from their male counterparts in this respect (176). McDowell refers in particular to the flatter gendering of abuse in Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl in support of this claim. Jacobs presents, for McDowell, a diegesis in which slave women are just as under threat from other women as they are from men (176). Incidents is held as a remarkable text for a few reasons, such as its treatment of sexual, as well as racial and conditional, oppression; its identification of the reader as female; its formal use of the mode of sentimental fiction and its status as the ‘first full-length slave narrative by a woman to be published in [the United States]’ (Yellin 263). Furthermore, the text is said to present a ‘double critique of nineteenth-century American ideas and institutions’, simultaneously challenging racist and patriarchal ideology (Yellin 270).

Jacobs’s text is also a useful comparative example to Douglass’s in terms of the author’s deployment of Christianized form and language within her broader literary aims. In some ways, this literary interpretation of Christianity can be seen to thematically resemble Douglass, and indeed most slave narratives. This interpretation is one that establishes Christian identity as a mark of respectability and sees the autobiographer writing themselves status through writing themselves Christian. This is evident for Jacobs in her Christianized portrayal of the injustice of continued bondage following expectations of freedom upon her mistress’s death (11). Jacobs’s narrator directly quotes scripture—‘love thy neighbour as thyself’—to emphasise the moral injustice at work within slavery, but in doing so also
demonstrates for the reader the autobiographer’s knowledge and application of such respectable Christian temperance herself (11).

In addition to dissolving Christianized rhetoric into her autobiographical persona in this manner, Jacobs also echoes Douglass in her use of Christianized characterization to judge the moral worth of her characters. Her allocation of roles is similar too. ‘[G]ood uncle Fred’ represents the ‘piety and childlike trust in God’ (61), that is so desirable in Douglass’s slave Christianity. At the opposite pole of corrupt, slaveholding religion comes her master Dr. Flint. His Christian membership, rather than ‘purifying’ him, leads him to act with increased physical and verbal abuse towards the narrator (63). Jacobs therefore sets up clear, polarizing standards of behaviour and morality that align the values of slave liberation with those of pious Christianity. In this, her Christian literary strategy aligns with Douglass’s. However, her narrative focalization of these demonstrative characters is noticeably different from Douglass’s. Where Douglass overwhelmingly characterizes and voices different characters through his own focalization, Jacobs voices uncle Fred and Dr. Flint through extended direct speech. For uncle Fred, this means the conventional cadences of the good-hearted but uneducated slave: ‘Hab patience, child … I larns slow’ (61). Dr. Flint’s oratory, on the other hand, is that of the articulate but morally corrupt villainous tyrant: ‘I am your master, and you shall obey me’ (63).

The difference between Jacobs’s direct speech and Douglass’s mono-focalized perspective is crucial. Its effect is that character voices in Jacobs’s narrative appear more mimetically, closer to the actual speech as it would be rendered in reality. In other words, Jacobs allows these characters to speak for themselves, whereas Douglass does all their speaking for them. This increasingly shared narrative focalization in Jacobs can therefore be seen as a fairer representation of these characters. While Jacobs still plays a visible, authorial role in shaping even the other characters’ mimetic discourse, she does allow them to stand in more audible, three-dimensional defence of their arguments. We might say that they are subjects in their own right, rather than objects designed purely to suit the singular political agenda of a single autobiographical persona. However, to flip this argument is to ask whether Jacobs’s narrative fairness may come at the expense of the directness of her polemic. It may be the case that Douglass’s more singular focalized autobiographical style also delivers a more unequivocal and unified political argument, however exploitative his text may be considered towards its secondary characters in achieving this.
The successes of Douglass’s *Narrative* as a work of anti-slavery polemic may therefore be strongly connected to his sophisticated strategic literary manipulation of Christian values and ideology. Douglass writes himself as a Christian both explicitly – on the level of content – and implicitly – on the level of form. In the text’s appendix, and at various other junctures, the narrator crafts a direct and pointed polarised argument as regards the Christian dimension of the slavery debate. This argument splits Christianity into the two binary categories of “good Christianity” and “bad Christianity”. The singular pole around which this binary operates is slavery; those who oppose slavery necessarily practice good, pure Christianity and those who support it practice a hypocritical, doctored form. Douglass uses various literary strategies to reinforce his own claim to “good” Christianity. He adopts formal modes that he hopes will cause his reader to associate the autobiographer with Christian respectability. Some of these modal adoptions are quite overt and constructed; such as his presentations of biblical quotes and references, use of the romantic apostrophe and ministerial, sermonic register. Other times these strategies are more subtle; such as his use of irony and conversational usages of Christianized expressions.

Douglass’s characters function as stereotypes of polarized Christianity in a similar way. Douglass adapts the conventional stereotypes of sentimental novels to create an oppositional narrative of villains and victims. His slaveholding villains are unequivocally wicked, and either hypocritical Christians or not Christian at all. He and his slave victims, on the other hand, are without exception brave, loyal and religiously faithful. While all of his slave characters represent the victim stereotype to a certain extent, his female characters take up an especially degraded function in the *Narrative*. The narrator demonstrates a near perverse propensity to graphically detail female slave whippings. In doing so, he reinforces the exploitative mastery of the slaveholders by presenting these women’s abused bodies as ‘grist to the mill’ for his abolitionist cause. Crucially, it is a Christian stereotype –the pious, passive, meek female “innocent” – that is the basis for this literary strategy. Despite being a mistress rather than a slave, Douglass even casts Mrs. Auld as a metaphorical slave to the demonic influences of slavery. His own presumptions about proper, female Christian behaviour consistently frame this characterisation. Here, as throughout the narrative, his focalization is consistently narrowed and entirely the voice of Douglass himself, leaving no space for competing character voices or narrative perspectives.

We might therefore say that the successes of Douglass’s religious liberation narrative come at a cost. In his sermonic, oratorical condemnation of the unchristian evils of slavery, he
presents a clear and polarised argument, that appeals directly to the moral integrity of his audience. His religious polemic manages to establish a defined symbolic framework of liberation and oppression. His exploitation of the Christian moral definitions between good and bad states of being forms the basis of this framework; liberation is equivalent to salvation and oppression to damnation. This is not only straightforward, but recognisable and palatable to his audience. On the other hand, by adopting such a polarized narrative mode Douglass sacrifices nuance and variety. Douglass’s voice is unwaveringly Douglass’s own, leaving no room for narrative exploration of other perspectives and approaches to events and characters. This may be seen at best as a missed opportunity, but for the text’s female characters it is demonstrably exploitative. It may therefore be argued that Douglass’s contribution to sculpting a direct, exhortative religious concept of black liberation was both valuable and problematic in its influence on the development of the black liberation theme in African American autobiography by men.
Chapter 2: James Baldwin and the Religious Oppression Narrative

Chapter one focused exclusively on narratives penned by black American slaves prior to their legal emancipation in 1865. In this second chapter, we move on to black autobiographical literature written between 1900 and 1965, covering the 1920s-1940s Harlem Renaissance and 1950s-1960s civil rights movement in the USA. As before, the key focus of the chapter is on the literary function of religious language and metaphor in the discussion of liberation and oppression in black autobiography. The key text of this chapter is James Baldwin’s autobiographical essay ‘Down at the Cross’ from his 1964 publication *The Fire Next Time*. However, I also discuss various other earlier black autobiographical texts that can be seen as influences on Baldwin’s autobiographical mores.

The early-mid twentieth century is recognised as a time of cultural and literary revolution for black Americans. Perhaps most crucially for this study, and as will become evident later in the chapter, part of this revolution was a secular one. Nonetheless, it is important to recognise that the African American directions of discursive thought were not working in isolation at this time. The periods up to and including those in question saw general global advances in the realms of science and technology, as well as such large secular ideological movements as Marxism, Freudianism and Darwinism, that laid the foundations for an increasingly secularised interpretation of the nature of existence. These broader, global shifts in thought are therefore highly relevant to shifts in such specific discursive trends as the African American autobiographical rhetoric of liberation.

Nevertheless, I aim to argue in this chapter that the texts under scrutiny demonstrate that the African American autobiographical literary mode underwent its own revolution in the explosion of the spiritual liberation theme, and contributed in its own part to the global secular movement, as well as being affected by it.

The first half of this chapter focuses exclusively on the work and legacy of James Baldwin, with extensive close reading and analysis of his essay ‘Down at the Cross’. In particular, I identify Baldwin’s position within the African American literary tradition, discussing the ways in which he can be seen to adhere to, and depart from, the conventions that had been established up to his time of writing. This includes his perceived stance towards
religion, and the nuanced way that it enters into his liberation rhetoric. I put forward ‘Down at
the Cross’ as a useful source in the analysis of this theme, and outline my evidence in support
of reading the text as a critique not just of the religious institutions that it questions, but of the
usefulness of spirituality in the most general sense in the achievement of social liberation. The
second part of the chapter looks at ‘Down at the Cross’ in the context of the literary
influences that preceded it. The discussion draws from other, earlier, autobiographical texts
that demonstrate similar discursive themes in the evolution of the black secular liberation
narrative. I look at the rhetoric of the Touchstone narratives – a term I will define and clarify
below – of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston and James Weldon
Johnson to support the notion that Baldwin’s text owes a great deal to a pre-existing secular
black liberation theme. Lastly, I compare Baldwin’s 1963 secular narrative in ‘Down at the
Cross’ with the religious figuration of social freedom as represented in the contemporaneous
literature of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. The aim here is to emphasise the increase
of diversity within understandings of spiritual faith and liberation, as well as the non-religious
alternative offered by secularism at this time. This diversity, I suggest, played an important
role in the eventual broadening of the liberation narrative at the time and in the later
millennial black liberation narrative that will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Most criticism of Baldwin’s writing places him within the African American literary
tradition. For a number of reasons, he is therefore often likened to Douglass as an authorial
figure (see Baker, Kinnamon et al.) Both writers are held as spokesmen of their respective
black historical communities, commenting both personally and on behalf of their African
American social groups. Furthermore, the slave narratives and Douglass’s work are often
cited as important and direct influences on that of Baldwin. Much of Baldwin’s writing can
therefore be seen to demonstrate a similar preoccupation with themes of personal and social
liberation. Equally, the strong autobiographical traditions of his slave narrator influences are
noticeable in the form and content of both Baldwin’s fictional and his non-fictional texts.

Within this set of influences, Houston A. Baker Jr. highlights the recurrence of
‘autobiographical and traditional’ themes in Baldwin’s work; his literary search for both
freedom and identity (64). Baldwin is, for Baker, ‘at his most assured as a Black
autobiographer appalled by his countrymen’s myopia’ (64). Watkins describes Baldwin’s
writing as operating both within the ‘tradition of black-American polemical essayists’ as well
as the ‘tradition of American romantic-moralists’ (234). As well as demonstrating black
literary conventions though, Baldwin’s writing also reflects movements away from discourses
that underpin the slave narratives. One area in which this is particularly noteworthy is in his discussion of the spiritual and religious dimensions of freedom and liberation as both literary and social themes. It has been critically recognised that the level of religious doubt in Baldwin’s work, especially in the conversion process, sets it apart from earlier slave narratives (O’Neale 127-128). As we discussed in Chapter 1, Christian faith in Douglass’s Narrative and the slave narrative canon was almost unwaveringly connected to the achievement of personal and social freedom. For Baldwin, however, questioning this assumption was not just a characterization of, but a major preoccupation of, the then current black literary endeavour.

While there is a general critical consensus that religion is an important theme in Baldwin’s writing, the identification of a firm pattern or clear stance on the subject across his canon has proven more problematic. On the one hand, it is argued that he was ‘secular to his fingertips’, and that his writing similarly demonstrated a ‘comprehensive secularization’ (Brown qtd. in Field 438). This secular framing of the black liberation question is therefore held as one of the key aspects of Baldwin’s legacy. Hernton argues, for example, that one of Baldwin’s endeavours was to promote real-world action over preaching in overcoming the ‘objective socio-political and economic conditions’ that restrain African Americans. In this, for Hernton, Baldwin necessarily adopted, and inspired other black writers to adopt, ‘a secular rather than religious frame of reference’ in discussing this problem (116). O’Neale supports this view of Baldwin as an iconic secular figure in black literature, arguing that his works illustrate ‘more than … any other black American writer … the schizophrenia of the black American experience with Christianity’ (127). Baldwin’s mode was, for O’Neale, one that merely questioned, rather than outright dismissed, divine existence. Nonetheless, his persistent emphasis on the black Church’s ‘lack of authentic Christian commitment’ cemented his legacy as, for O’Neale, ‘the last black American writer to exploit as a major theme the black man’s relationship with Christianity’ (140).

On the other hand, it has also been frequently noted that both Baldwin’s personal legacy and his writing owe a great deal to the mores of Christianity. Yardley likens Baldwin’s style to that of the ‘homily’ in its combination of logic and passion, and notes the ‘cadences … of hellfire and brimstone’ in his prose that reflect the importance of the Church in his personal and literary background (241). Furthermore, Baldwin’s stance on Christianity as a subject in his work has shown signs of ambiguity. While he is seen to criticise the tendency of the church, in offering a ‘place of safety’, to foster ‘passivity and a sublimation of
individuality’, he is also allegedly sympathetic of the refuge that it provides for ‘people like his father, who, in the face of racism, had nowhere else to turn’ (Field 446). Field proposed the theory in 2008, that Baldwin’s religious identity in his prose can be interpreted as Pentecostal rather than secular. Field suggests that Pentecostalism not only best describes the non-European mode of African American Christianity that Baldwin attempted to support, but that its emphasis on reviving older, folk traditions in modern Christianity also lines up with Baldwin’s moral literary aims (441-442). While Baldwin’s literary and historical legacy is therefore most often held as a secular one, it is also seen to pay a debt to the religious, literary mores of its ancestors.

Of all of his texts, ‘Down at the Cross’ is regarded as perhaps representing Baldwin’s most confrontational discussion of the religious liberation narrative. It has been described, for example, as Baldwin’s most explicit critique of Christianity’s ‘prolonged vilification of the black body’ (Hardy qtd. in Field 445). Further emphasised are its positioning of the church within the ‘American power game’ (Baker 69), and its ‘atypical’ depiction of the dissatisfying results of the ‘ethnic conversion experience’ (O’Neale 130). Ultimately, the text’s central message is perceived as a ‘denial of faith’; its portrayal of the black church as incompatible with actual ‘salvation’ for the author and the black population (135). This open questioning of the ‘justice, judgement and sincerity of God’ in ‘Down at the Cross’ is, moreover, held as particularly bold and unmatched by any previous black American writer (131). Once again, the text is seen as iconic in this regard, inspiring future African American scholars to carry forward the charges brought against Christianity for its role in the mechanisms of slavery and colonialism (Field 444-445).

As noted above of his writing in general, though, Baldwin’s critique of religion in ‘Down at the Cross’ comes from within religion itself. The narrative is at once reliant on the discourses, symbolism and rhetoric of Christian preaching and simultaneously deeply critical of these very literary vehicles. The title itself, like those of many of Baldwin’s texts, is biblically evocative, alluding to the Christian hymn ‘Down at the Cross Where My Savior Died’ (Weatherby 197). Baldwin himself was unapologetic about this religious dimension to an otherwise secular whole in his writing, remarking in one interview that while a writer may ‘[come] out’ of the black religious liberation narrative, he need not be ‘limited’ to it (Baldwin qtd. in O’Neale 129). In the following textual analysis of ‘Down at the Cross’, I tend to position Baldwin’s liberation narrative as an ultimately secular one that adopts religiously infused literary devices as a matter of form rather than content and message. Furthermore, I
will suggest that Baldwin’s critique is not simply, as Field puts it, of ‘institutional spirituality’ (449), but of the usefulness of any kind of spiritual faith in the achievement of liberation for African Americans.

The structure of ‘Down at the Cross’ can be divided into three distinct narrative episodes. The first of these (pp. 27-67) deals largely with the narrator’s experiences with, and contemplations on, the Christian Church whilst growing up in Harlem. The second (pp. 67-111) is set within and around a social encounter between Baldwin’s narrator and then leader of the Nation of Islam (NOI) movement, Elijah Muhammed, at his home in Chicago. The final section (pp. 111-141) can be considered a summary of the narrator’s social liberation theory – formed at least in part by the experiences outlined in the previous two episodes. Most critics have focused on the first of these episodes – his experiences in the Christian church – in discussing the secular dimension of the text. The proposed challenge to religion in general is therefore most often interpreted as one and the same as a specific challenge to the Christian religion. However, I wish to pay a little more attention to how this first episode relates to the second and third, as parts of a unified theoretical whole. I argue that this unified approach supports a reading of the text as one entirely opposed to the idea of spiritual faith as a liberation device.

Let us turn to the first episode of the text. In this part, as in the others, Baldwin makes use of the flexible autobiographical mode to split his prose, generally speaking, into two forms: the descriptive and the contemplative. The descriptive content of the episode outlines the ‘prolonged religious crisis’ (27) undergone by the narrator in and around his fourteenth year. Becoming ‘afraid’ for the first time of the various menaces to be found in his environment, the narrator describes his logical craving for the safety of the Church (27-28) – eventually becoming a minister (48). The integrity of this faith is short-lived though, and the narrator next tells of its ‘slow crumbling’, as a result of his renewed interest in reading, (51) and subsequent acknowledgement of the errors, inconsistencies and contradictions within the historical Christian narrative (51-67). The contemplative mode – more dominant in the latter half of the episode, but scattered throughout – provides the platform for Baldwin’s critique of Christianity according to his own narrated experiences and in general.

We have already touched on previous critical commentary on this subject, but there is more to be said. As with Douglass’ condemnations of hypocritical slaveholding Christianity, Baldwin’s contemplations on Christianity are morally and ideologically driven. He alludes to ideological flaws in Christianity from the outset by linking significations of the words
‘religious’ and ‘safety’ (27). Baldwin therefore portrays his journey towards Christianity as an act of escape from the dangers embodied by ‘the Avenue’ (28). This is evident in the narrator’s choice of panicked verbs; he ‘fled’ towards (33), was ‘hurl[ed]’ into (38), or ‘driven’ into (42) the church respectively. This act of escape therefore mirrors Douglass’s drive to escape from slavery. However, Baldwin’s escape into the Church is tainted by the inadequacy of the escape that he ultimately finds. The Church is one of many sources of escapism from the inevitable hopelessness of being a black man in America – on an equal level with drugs, alcohol, the army and crime (33-34).

The narrator develops this relationship between Christianity and the race problem, arguing that the former seems to reinforce racial inequality between white and black people in its very core methods. Of particular note are the echoes of Douglass in Baldwin’s ridicule of the logic that degrades black people on the basis that they are descended from the biblical character Ham (Baldwin 53; Douglass 13). However, unlike Douglass Baldwin’s critique of Christian hypocrisy extends to the black, as well as the white, Church. The former is criticised for its practice of love as a ‘mask for self-hatred and despair’ and its refusal to extend the mantra of universal love to those of different beliefs and skin colours (Baldwin 57-58). All of the narrator’s experiences with Christianity confirm for him that it does not practice what it preaches. It primarily functions, for the narrator, on an ideology of fear rather than hope – encouraging followers to love God out of fear of going to hell rather than simply ‘because they loved him (52, emphasis in original).

Baldwin’s portrayal of the church therefore suggests that it fails to meet its own practical moral standards, generating a following who act towards others not on the basis of ‘Faith, Hope and Charity’, but of ‘Blindness, Loneliness and Terror’ (47). This blindness is what the Church demands in exchange for safety, and the refusal of such a deal is a key element of the narrator’s theory towards a better society. As a youth, Baldwin’s narrator protests the question posed by a pastor, “[w]hose little boy are you?” (43). His criticism of this question is of the assumption, like that made by the ‘pimps and racketeers on the Avenue’, that he ‘unquestionably wanted to be somebody’s little boy’ (43, emphasis in original). This reflects his later criticism of the way that the Church insists that the individual sacrifice independence of thought and leave this to the collective, the institution. Until it forgoes this, for Baldwin, it can be no more useful in resisting racial inequality than alcohol, drugs, crime or, as will be discussed below, parallel religious institutions such as the Nation of Islam.
Significantly, the aforementioned pastor is one of the few directly discussed female characters in the text. Baldwin’s characterization of her is in many ways more respectful than Douglass’s polarized emphasis on women as helpless victims of slavery. He draws attention to her ‘robes’ and describes her as ‘proud [and] handsome’; ‘a very celebrated woman … in our world’ (43). She is therefore introduced with power and status; a leader figure in the narrator’s understanding of the world. However, it is important to note that she represents the primary target of Baldwin’s criticism; the alluring fear represented by dominating institutions such as the church and the Avenue. Her narrative role has therefore evolved from Douglass’s “pious victim” to representing a far more sinister, threatening power. In both cases, the narrator’s strategic literary function of Christianity lies at the heart of this characterization. The difference between Douglass and Baldwin is that in the latter the Church as a whole represents oppression, whereas in the former it represented oppression in its hypocritical, slaveholder form and liberation in its pure, unadulterated form. When Baldwin casts women in the role of devout Christian, they therefore occupy a far more menacing narrative space.

Female characters are fleeting in ‘Down at the Cross’, but when they do appear directly it tends to be in this position, as a threat. The youthful narrator’s early encounter with his female peers is also one of fear. Firstly, the narrator vaguely fears their blooming sexuality; ‘their budding breasts … rounding behinds … their eyes, their heat, their odor’ (28-29). Secondly, the narrator comes to fear what he calls the ‘rather terrifying single-mindedness’ that comes from their Christian devotion (28-29). The narrator portrays them as ‘God’s decoys, saving the souls of the boys for Jesus and binding the bodies of the boys in marriage’ (30). He quotes an example of their dialogue as “You better be thinking about your soul!” (30). Baldwin’s infrequent direct quoting of female characters therefore works against them. As with the aforementioned pastor and these female peers of the narrator, their direct voicing only underlines their function as mimics of Christian doctrine and agents of institutional domination. We will discuss later in the chapter how Baldwin presents individual independence of thought and will as preferable to institutional brainwashing. However, the above demonstrates that this does not appear to apply to women in the same way as to men. Power, strength and single-mindedness in female characters are criticised and seen to induce fear for the same reasons as the religious dominance that the narrator portrays as their foundation.

Baldwin’s narrative voice is far more at ease when placing women back into the passive, submissive role deemed appropriate in Douglass’s Narrative. The church in which
Baldwin first encounters the aforementioned pastor is described as ‘empty, except for some women cleaning and some other women praying’ (43). The word ‘empty’ gives away how little the narrator appears to regard that a space occupied by women is occupied at all. Female characters float similarly in the margins of the narrative in Baldwin’s later meeting with Elijah Muhammed. A group of women are noted upon the narrator’s entrance to the room; all ‘much occupied with a beautiful baby’ (85). He remarks a page later upon them ‘carrying on their own conversation, in low tones’, adding that they were evidently ‘not expected to take part in male conversations’ (86). While to an extent this narrative silencing of women is not so much the narrator’s as that of the setting, it is notable how little attempt the narrator makes to include women into the conversations his own text addresses. Women are either largely ignored, completely absent or cast into stereotypical roles as threatening, domineering representatives of crippling social institutions.

Baldwin therefore makes women particular enemies in his criticism of the Christian church. This first episode of the text sets up Christianity, both as an institution and an ideology, as flawed in terms of their ability to provide what they offer. Baldwin argues that instead of acting as the site of liberation that it claims to be, it actually represents a prime site of oppression for black Americans. The narrator’s own motives for entering the church, and the subsequent anti-climax of his experience, underline this as the direct subject of this first episode. The episode concludes with Baldwin’s famous ultimatum that we either support a God who makes us ‘larger, freer and more loving’ or accept that it is ‘time we got rid of him’ (67). This may be interpreted as a hopeful view towards the future of Christianity, if it is drastically altered. However, I suggest, like many others, that the form and content of this episode and the rest of the text suggests that it is the latter of these two options that is here being framed as both the preferable and more realistic route.

Let us now turn to the second of the two episodes of ‘Down at the Cross’ (67-111), in which Baldwin’s narrator meets Elijah Muhammed. There are various parallels to be drawn between this episode and the first. They both take a given religious movement as their primary point of discussion; where in the first episode this was Christianity, in the second this is the Nation of Islam (NOI). Moreover, they both discuss and eventually reject said religion, using descriptive content of a single key event in justification of this. In the first episode, this event is the experience of becoming a Christian pastor, in the second this is the meeting with Muhammed. They also, as mentioned previously, both fluidly employ descriptive and contemplative modes to achieve this. The narrator’s contemplations on Muhammed and the
NOI introduce this episode and lead up the key event of the meeting towards its close. This introduction foreshadows the later dismissal of the NOI in prejudging its message as ‘not very original’ (68). However, the account quickly takes on a far more positive tone than that granted Christianity in the first episode. The narrator notes his admiration of the fact that the preaching of the movement inspired fear in the police and a ‘silent intensity’ and look of ‘integrity’ and ‘dedication’ in the crowd (68-70). Whilst acknowledging the efforts of Muhammed himself, though, the narrator rather ascribes the successes of the NOI to ‘time’ more than any particular individual (72). As the narrator later clarifies, by this he means the increased loss of faith in the white Christian God that has led black people in America to seek another way towards social liberation: ‘[t]he white God has not delivered them; perhaps the Black God [of Islam] will’ (80). The Nation of Islam movement is therefore judged by the narrator, with a degree of affinity, as the inevitable consequence of the oppressed conditions of its followers.

Following this introduction, the narrator begins to focus on the meeting itself. This was, we are told, initiated by Muhammed rather than Baldwin; and if the motives of the former were that of converting the latter to the Nation of Islam movement, this result goes unachieved. The two men part ways as, in Baldwin’s words, partial allies and with a certain closeness – perhaps best interpreted as due to their shared purpose of black liberation - yet still ‘strangers’ and potentially future ‘enemies’, because ‘what he [Muhammed] conceived as his responsibility and what I [Baldwin] took to be mine’ (107). Baker once summarized this second episode of ‘Down at the Cross’ as a process by which ‘the Muslims [NOI] are scrutinized but eventually put aside because the narrator is a writer and likes doing things alone’ (69). While this assessment is an accurate one, I wish to suggest that it does not quite do justice to the rhetorical purpose that the episode carries within the whole text. There are clear parallels between Baldwin’s experienced discomfort with the Nation of Islam and that of the Christian Church. Baldwin’s narrator reveals this insecurity early in the episode, comparing his feelings of guilt and shame upon entering the house with his first experiences of entering a church, a general and irrational sense of wrongdoing and sin (84-85).

Baldwin’s fears also constitute being consumed by the movement; as he reveals in his concern with becoming ‘James X’ (83-84), as was consistent with the naming rituals of the NOI. The narrator’s first description of Muhammed himself develops this rhetorical pattern of consumed individual agency, taking the narrator back to the aforementioned encounter with the Christian pastor (43). The repeated question “[w]hose little boy are you?” becomes a
motif, linking the NOI with Christianity in terms of individual and collective power and agency. When Baldwin talks of individual and collective ‘responsibility’, as quoted above, his fears visibly reflect that of his earlier reaction to the Church’s insistence on relinquished individual agency— the expectation of his wanting to be ‘somebody’s little boy’ (43, emphasis in original). This is both inadequate and potentially harmful for Baldwin’s narrator, and the NOI, like Christianity, therefore fails to meet Baldwin’s standards as a useful social liberation process. The common denominator is that they both demand the relinquishment of independent thought and agency. The essential problem, therefore, is not just that they are religious institutions, but that they demand spiritual faith in the most basic sense.

As mentioned previously, Baldwin uses the third and final episode of ‘Down at the Cross’ to summarise his rhetorical purpose in contemplation of the events outlined in the previous two. It is worth mentioning at this point that the aforementioned spiritual dimension is not Baldwin’s only justification for rejecting either Christianity or the Nation of Islam from his social theory. In this final episode, Baldwin returns more specifically to criticisms of both religions according to their theories regarding race. In this regard, the NOI comes under renewed fire for its ‘glorification’ of the black race and subsequent ‘debasement’ of the white race—a binary reversal response to racism that the narrator claims ‘always has been and always will be a recipe for murder’ (112). This echoes his earlier criticisms of the failure of the black Christian church to offer love and accept outside of and beyond racial boundaries (57-58). The NOI face arguably stronger indictment here in their ideological comparison to ‘the Nazis’ (113). Encouraging ‘disfavor’ according to skin colour, writes Baldwin, is not an adequate response to racism in that it is guilty of the same crime and leads to the same consequences (112-113).

I will discuss later in this chapter how far ‘Down at the Cross’ can be considered original and how far a product of its environment and influences. At present, suffice it to say that this third episode contains many tropes that have since become staples in the discussion of racial liberation. The above comments regarding reverse-racism echo future theory as to the deconstruction of the racial binary. Prophetic too is the insistence upon shifting the focus from the oppressed black population to the white oppressors— concluded with the insistence that ‘everything white Americans think they believe in must now be reexamined [sic]’ (139). This is a train of thought that anticipates future ‘whiteness’ theory. The important shift is from a racial problem to a broader problem with American culture at its roots. In this, Baldwin also touches upon the problem of ‘the American Dream’, in that it ‘has become something much
more closely resembling a nightmare’ for racial harmony (120). This angle on the ‘dream’ is a thematic torch that is visibly taken up by Coates in *Between the World and Me*, and will be discussed further in Chapter 3. Baldwin’s ‘dream’ is of, in his words, ‘unconditional freedom for the Negro’, which is, at the same time, the only way to save America from ‘sterility and decay’ (126). This freedom is therefore not the same as equality, as the white population are in equal need of liberation from their cultural degradation, but a question of giving power to the powerless (130). This also, therefore, reflects the emphasis on power within the subsequent adoption of race studies as a literary preoccupation of culture studies in the years that followed publication of the text.

Perhaps most noteworthy and directly relevant to our discussion of the secular theme in the final episode of ‘Down at the Cross’ are its last two pages. Baldwin’s narrator has, by this point, apparently rejected, both concretely and theoretically, the advances of the religions discussed in the text – namely Christianity and the Nation of Islam. The writing has in general shifted from description of religious and spiritual experience to objective and theoretical discussion of social theory. The form of the writing has moved from exclamatory and dramatic to intellectual and considered, maturing as if in harmony with the knowledge and experience accrued by the narrator-protagonist throughout. However, in this final summary paragraph the narrator leaps back into the register of evangelical, biblical grandeur and begins to talk of the apocalyptic results of allowing racial oppression to continue. Baldwin evokes ‘vengeance’ on the part of either God or Allah and of ‘historical [and] cosmic’ origin (140-141). The preacher’s register of exhortation and urgency is recognisable in such phrases as ‘do not falter in our duty’ and ‘[i]f we do not now dare everything’ (141). Finally, the text closes with the warning of a fulfilled biblical prophecy directly quoted from a slave song: ‘*God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time*’ (141, italics in original).

Baldwin gives no indication that this passage is meant to be read anything other than literally – that is to say, that he is actually suggesting the occurrence of Godly vengeance as a result of human neglect. This is somewhat at odds with the consistently secular liberation theory that had been developing up to this point. Still, as suggested previously, the overwhelmingly rational influence of the rest of the text makes it plausible to read this choice of language as a rhetorical decision made to enhance a point. This ‘apocalypse’ can therefore be read more figuratively, as one induced by mankind in the form, for example, of another world war or similar disaster. It is perhaps best to accept, in this passage, the continued influence of religion in Baldwin’s writing, and the complicated place it occupied in his
rhetorical discussion black liberation. Even so, it is noteworthy that Baldwin’s solutions are still resolutely concrete – to argue and persuade, to ‘insist on, or create the consciousness of … others’ (141) – rather than to rely on spiritual or institutional faith and thus defer responsibility for action.

I therefore uphold that ‘Down at the Cross’ can be seen to harbour a unified rejection of the religious liberation narrative in favour of a religious oppression narrative. This involves identifying like patterns across both Baldwin-as-narrator’s experiences as a Christian minister and with the Nation of Islam. Both Christianity and Islam offer Baldwin’s narrator the opportunity to sacrifice personal and independent judgement to larger bodies that will do it for him: the institution and the deity. Baldwin, as both protagonist and theorist, rejects both for this very reason. He implores his reader not simply to settle for the safety of blind faith, but to critique and challenge convenient truths, however uncomfortable this may be. Both the form and content of the text therefore supports a liberation narrative in which the individual is solely responsible for actively scrutinizing, through evidence and reason, social institutions such as religion. These may act as both barriers to, and opportunities for, personal betterment, and the individual must make concrete, material decisions as to how best make these institutions work. In the end, the abstract, spiritual frame of displaced faith is shown to have no place within the narrator’s liberation narrative, and this is the fundamental essence that the reader takes away from ‘Down at the Cross’.

This is therefore a distinct evolution from the slave liberation narrative that we identified in chapter 1, as exemplified by Douglass’s Narrative. The difference is perhaps best summarized as that of religious choice. Douglass’s text insists upon Christianity, albeit only the purity of Christianity ‘proper’, as the singular spiritual accompaniment to liberation. Baldwin’s narrator, however, insists on individual spiritual choice in the fight for liberation, himself rejecting the advances of two religions on the grounds, at least in part, that they deny this individual agency. What is also noticeable, though, is the extent to which Baldwin’s religious oppression narrative in ‘Down at the Cross’ still relies on Christian form and imagery. This text therefore demonstrates the charged status of the black liberation narrative at its date of publication; a time in which both spiritual and secular narratives were competing for power and status in black autobiographical writing.

I briefly mentioned above how the text ‘Down at the Cross’, being an autobiographical essay, gives some idea of the dominant modes of black liberation theory within its period of discussion. It must be noted, therefore, that Baldwin was not solely responsible for the
creation of the ideas that he discusses in ‘Down at the Cross’ or his other works. In many ways, this is self-evident in the text, as he refers explicitly to the real and established institutions and ideologies of Christianity and the Nation of Islam, among other well-known and pre-existing theories. Watkins suggests, for example, that, alongside those of Douglass, Baldwin’s writing recycles the ideas of such writers as W. E. B. Du Bois and Richard Wright (233). As regards the secular liberation narrative too, O’Neale traces the secular revolution in black literature more generally to the secularized Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s (128).

Various fictional works borne of this period, for example works by James Weldon Johnson, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, demonstrate for O’Neale, the development of this secular revolution (128). What set Baldwin apart from his literary ancestors, though, beyond ‘the accident of timing’, was his ‘uniquely personal perspective and style’ (Watkins 234). Watkins therefore implicates the closely personal autobiographical mode in Baldwin’s ideological legacy, and suggests, by implication, that this is crucial to his secular legacy. Nonetheless, there were other black autobiographers who, prior to Baldwin, demonstrably employed a sceptical take on the spiritual liberation narrative.

Michael Lackey’s book African American Atheists and Political Liberation explores the impact of secular black autobiographical writing. Lackey laments the historical exclusion of African American atheists from an otherwise fruitful body of work on atheism (2). In response to this the text offers detailed analysis of the tension between religious and atheist themes in the literature of Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes among others. Like many before him, Lackey observes the role of the God concept in justifying racial oppression, as well as calling for more critical attention as to how such a phenomenon was naturalized and normalized to become beyond question or challenge (4-5). Furthermore, Lackey’s text, like this thesis, recognizes a ‘crucial distinction between nineteenth and twentieth century approaches to the God concept’ as they are discussed in black personal narratives (118-119). This is namely, that such nineteenth century texts as Douglass’ and Equiano’s respective narratives criticize the improper practice of Christianity but not the religion as a whole, whereas such twentieth century black authors as Hughes, Wright and Hurston began to question its value in the absolute sense (199-121). Lackey explains this evolution as at least partly due to the increased twentieth century understanding of knowledge as a ‘psychosemiotic construction rather than a pregiven reality’, which encouraged black life-writers to increasingly reject the notion of pure religion and increasingly see it as a subjective idea used to reinforce oppressive racial politics (120).
Lackey therefore proposes that twentieth century black writers began to experiment with narrative form to reflect this emerging tendency of questioning the objectivity of religion. Drawing on the idea of a ‘touchstone’ as a determinant ‘of the quality or value of something’, Lackey groups such texts under a generic umbrella he calls ‘Touchstone narratives’. Instead of retelling the narrator’s religious conversion as in a conversion narrative, Lackey writes, Touchstone narratives document said narrator’s reasons for ‘[rejecting] the God concept and religion’ (118). Lackey argues that Hughes, Hurston and Wright can all be considered authors of Touchstone narratives that test the God concept and conclude that ‘God is an idea that should probably be put to rest’ (118). Lackey presents, in his conclusion, a ‘manifesto’ for ‘black liberation antitheology’ (142). Exploring atheistic trends in the history of black literature provides enough evidence, for Lackey, that a non-religious approach to achieving ‘positive social transformation for all people’ may be far more effective than its religious alternative (150). According to this logic, Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’ can be said to represent a result of a secular evolution in black autobiography that had developed over the body of work since the start of the twentieth century.

Let us explore the rejection of Christianity as a literary device in Lackey’s aforementioned Touchstone narratives. In his 1940 autobiography The Big Sea, Langston Hughes outlines in a short early chapter entitled ‘Salvation’ (18-21) an unfulfilled conversion experience that strongly resembles that of Baldwin’s in ‘Down at the Cross’. When Hughes’ narrator was ‘saved from sin’, he writes, he was ‘not really saved’ (18). The young narrator is expectant of great things, bright lights and the experience of ‘[feeling] Jesus in your soul’ (19). Disappointingly, though, upon ‘waiting serenely for Jesus to come’ throughout the church ritual, the narrator reports that ‘nothing happened’ and is compelled to feign being saved out of shame and ‘to save further trouble’ (20). This experience is traumatic for the narrator, and the combined shame of his deception and anxiety caused by having to keep up the lie in his community causes him to reject Christian faith entirely. Not only had he not ‘seen Jesus’, writes Hughes’ narrator, but the fact that ‘he [Jesus] didn’t come to help me [Hughes]’ causes the child to stop believing in him (21). As for Baldwin’s young narrator, then, Christianity fails for Hughes to deliver the comfort and safety that it promises.

Richard Wright has perhaps been the most frequently recognised influence on Baldwin’s literary style in general. The title of his text Native Son is visibly influential on Baldwin’s own Notes of a Native Son. Furthermore, the various metaphorical evocations of ‘fire’ that Baldwin employs in ‘Down at the Cross’ and The Fire Next Time – apocalyptic,
passionate, revolutionary – are recognised as owing a great deal to Wright’s metaphorical usage of the word ‘fire’ (see for example Butler). It can also be seen, therefore, that Wright may have influenced the secular dimensions of Baldwin’s form and theory. Butler frames the ‘core of Wright’s vision’ as the problem of ‘how to achieve a human self while inhabiting a deterministic environment which systematically denies your status as a human being’ (46). This rational worldview, for Butler, therefore rejects the value of religion for black people on the grounds that it ‘provided them with fantasies which distracted them from addressing political and social problems in the real world’ (50).

In chapter four of Wright’s 1945 autobiography Black Boy, this anti-religious discourse is particularly noticeable. The narrator here confirms that his adherence to Christian worship as a child was ‘pretense’ made to appease his ‘Granny’ (89). Although experiencing emotional interest in the apocalyptic rhetoric of Church sermons, the narrator in the end is left ‘[knowing] that none of it was true and that nothing would happen’ (89). Faced with an oppressively, threateningly religious home environment, the narrator’s response is to ‘[become] skilled in ignoring these cosmic threats and [develop] a callousness toward all metaphysical preachments’ (90). Attempting to fit in with the norms of his environment, the narrator attempts to at least convey the effective performance of Christianity. However, he finds himself unable to even achieve this because, in his words, ‘the Holy Ghost was simply nowhere near me’ (104). Despite Wright’s autobiographical imploring to the contrary, Butler suggests that Wright’s prose in this chapter demonstrates a fascination with Christian rhetoric that is evident in his later writing and personality (49-50). Like Baldwin, then, Wright’s secular liberation rhetoric can be seen as one that comes out of, and relies on, religious liberation rhetoric. However, in many ways Wright’s Black Boy can be seen to render an even firmer and more pronounced rejection of a view of spirituality that is portrayed in even bleaker and more personally oppressive language.

Zora Neale Hurston’s 1942 autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road is another key exemplary text here, contributing to the rise of secular black autobiographical writing in its own way. The text’s fifteenth chapter entitled ‘Religion’ discusses the subject over thirteen pages. The comprehensiveness of this discussion demonstrates the author’s need ‘to come to terms with [religion] on an intellectual basis’ (Bosničová 113). Hurston’s narrator reveals her birth, like Baldwin’s, to a preacher father (266). Similarly, experience of the Christian Church sermon leaves Hurston’s narrator, with a ‘lack in [her] mind’ (267). Speaking from within a cultural religious ideology supposed to be ‘known and settled’ (266), the narrator instead
finds it to be illogical and flawed. She is unable to reconcile, for example, the sense in ‘making babies with no teeth’ (267) and why people still died if Jesus had died on their behalf (268). There is a similar cynicism in the narrator’s take on the conversion experience. This is evident in the formulaic, repetitive descriptive tone of the conversion protocol; ‘[the convert] became conscious of their sins. They were Godly sorry … They started to pray’ (273). The narrator finds this naivety odd because the process was always the same and well known by the audience (272). She therefore questions the sincerity of the convertee.

Furthermore, the consistent presence of Hell as a deterrent reveals, as in Baldwin, the narrator’s critique of the negative tactics by which Christianity allegedly operates (270). Fearing familial and social rejection in continuing to pursue her forbidden ‘fumes of doubt’ surrounding Christianity (268), the narrator finds herself pushing them away until the rebellious feeling and questions ‘went to sleep in [her]’ (269) and religion becomes an empty and faithless activity. Nevertheless, in thought – if not in deed – Hurston’s narrator is able to speak to a secular mode of liberated selfhood. The final paragraph of this chapter rejects the passivity of prayer, advocating instead the individual ‘mind and will-power’ as an alternative means for ‘working out [one’s] destiny’ (278). Hurston here speaks to accepting the ‘challenge of responsibility’ rather than seeking prayer as a means of avoiding, ‘by trickery, the rules of the game as laid down’ (278). Hurston’s social theory here has been interpreted as that of the individualist who wishes to avoid being ‘pigeonholed’ into specific categories, such as religion (Gates and Brantley qtd. in Bosničová 114). Her route to liberating herself from the chains of categorization according to the expectations of her society therefore involves individualism and thinking for oneself (Bosničová 114). In this emphasis on individual responsibility and agency of thought, Hurston’s rhetoric is, more than all other Touchstone narratives, perhaps most reminiscent of Baldwin’s liberation theory in ‘Down at the Cross’.

James Weldon Johnson’s 1912 *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* provides an earlier example of this secular narrative thread in black autobiography. While the example is brief, it may help to illuminate rhetorical likeness across the aforementioned texts of Hughes, Wright and Hurston. In the second chapter of Johnson’s *Autobiography*, the youthful narrator dismisses Christianity on the grounds that the Bible gave him the ‘general impression … that the authors put their best work in the first part, and grew either exhausted or careless toward the end’ (11). It may be argued that this can hardly be considered a serious critique of religion, but, nevertheless, it does bear rhetorical resemblance to the religious critique in
Hughes, Wright, Hurston and Baldwin. The root of this is what Plant calls, in discussing Hurston’s critique, the ‘cover of the naïve [child’s] voice [through which] the narrator questions the believers, their beliefs, and the idea of God itself’ (qtd. in Bosničová 113).

In Hurston’s narrative, Bosničová recognizes this technique in the childishly posited, yet rationally sound, questioning of Christian logic that we discussed above. Similarly, this strategy is recognizable in Wright’s *Black Boy*. In one episode, Wright’s youthful narrator describes his developing hatred for a visiting preacher due to the entitlement of the latter to roast chicken that the narrator is denied (23). On one level this complaint is portrayed as irrational and laughable; Wright’s narrator ends up ‘running blindly from the room’ bawling and screaming in protest that the ‘preacher’s going to eat all the chicken’ (23). However, in many ways the episode may be seen to harbour a subtler critique of the perceived over-inflated importance and entitlement of Christianity, as represented by one of its preachers in the local community. Wright’s narrator hints that this is at least part of his resentment for his preacher; not just his specific eating habits but the more general sense that he ‘was used to having his own way’ (23).

We may say, then, that the veil of childhood innocence allows the narrators to say the perhaps otherwise unsayable, and make a serious critique of the form and function of religious norms as they perceive them. This couching of religious scepticism in the rhetoric of childhood naïvety may have had its limits, but it may also be seen as a clever literary strategy towards the nourishment of a wider secular autobiographical trend. If this can be said to have proven instrumental in the development of more sophisticated and comprehensive secular critique such as that made in Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’, then its influence is undeniably relevant. The above examples of African American literary religious scepticism in the early twentieth-century demonstrate other recurring themes worthy of note, especially as regards their reflection in ‘Down at the Cross’.

Experience of the limitations or complete failure of religious conversion is one such theme that draws influence from but diverges from the more straightforward conversion experience of the slave narrative. Furthermore, we see an increased association of Christian scepticism with the act of learning; reading and experiencing enlightenment as to the ‘true’ history of Christianized white colonialism. More generally, inconsistent Christian morality and logic as they appear in the everyday lives of the youthful protagonists – most often carried out by their mature superiors – are consistently criticized. While this in some respects carries forward the slave narrator’s critique of hypocritical Christianity as a partner of
tyranny, it also denies an alternative ‘Christianity proper’, insisting instead that this injustice permeates Christianity as a whole. These are themes easily recognized as influential in some of the literary design of ‘Down at the Cross’. Still, I would argue that none of these previous texts present a unified, comprehensive and rationally balanced and sophisticated secular liberation theory to quite the same degree. This may, therefore, help to explain the impact of Baldwin’s writing and his subsequent secular legacy.

Tracing the secular exploration of the theme of liberation in the black autobiographical writing of the early twentieth century and Harlem Renaissance is therefore a useful exercise in its own right. However, as is evident in ‘Down at the Cross’ itself, it is also important to recognise that the secular liberation narrative was not working in isolation at this time, but was competing with significant religious liberation narratives for power and status. This is indicated by Baldwin’s very decision to discuss so comprehensively the religious ideology of Christianity and the Nation of Islam along with his secularised liberation theory. This is important in recognising the increased multiplicity and choice within the historical context of ‘Down at the Cross’ compared with that of Douglass’ *Narrative*. Christianized liberation rhetoric, firstly, was still as prominent as it was in the time of Douglass and his slave narrator counterparts.

Martin Luther King Jr. exemplifies a writer of such rhetoric, and his speeches often demonstrate this. Of particular note is his 1963 speech ‘I Have a Dream’ due to both its fame and its contemporaneity with Baldwin’s 1964 ‘Down at the Cross’. This text only partially qualifies as autobiographical, as its mode is one that looks forward rather than backwards in time. However, it does take the perspective of the implied narrator-as-author and thematically and rhetorically aligns with other African American autobiographers in the narrative discussion of social liberation. In the speech, King’s autobiographical “I” often speaks on the metaphorical level and often in a Christianized way. He depicts the human race, for example, as ‘God’s children’ and depicts the mores of passive resistance as ‘soul force’. This is not to suggest that he does not also address oppression, resistance and freedom in a material sense, but simply to underline that the effective achievement of the lattermost is, in the text, combined with spiritual, Christian faith. He suggests, for example, ‘faith’ in the belief that ‘suffering is redemptive’ as a response to ‘persecution’ and ‘police brutality’. This pattern increases in intensity as the speech progresses. King’s “I” repeats the motif ‘with this faith’ in tandem with prophetic imagery of liberation, and concludes with a number of biblically sourced evocations of a liberated world. King’s ‘dream’ is one rooted in the belief in and faith
in outside intervention of both material and spiritual agents of justice in the achievement of materially and spiritually intertwined salvation. The contrast here with Baldwin’s secular rhetoric of individual agency and the rejection of deferred responsibility is therefore pronounced.

The prominence of the ideology of the Nation of Islam is also central. While atheism may have been a discursive impossibility for Douglass and the slave narrators, it was also made evident in chapter 1 that slave narrative discourse exclusively wrote spiritual and Christian faith synonymously. In the 1960s United States, though, the Nation of Islam was establishing an alternative religion as a legitimate possibility, and thereby offering an alternative meaning of religious faith. This therefore also affected the interpretative potential of a spiritual liberation narrative. The 1964 Autobiography of Malcolm X is a key reference text here for a few reasons beyond its publication date. Its author was an important member of the NOI movement and intriguing public figure within the black civil rights movement. Furthermore, as Holte notes, the content of the Autobiography focuses heavily on the notions of Islam (40), as well as discussing black liberation, and is therefore useful in comparison with the secular and Christian black liberation narratives. Also, the text refigures known generic tropes more usually associated with Christian liberation and salvation narratives, such as those of the conversion narrative (Holte 39). As a child, Malcolm X’s narrator depicts an experience of Christianity that resembles the narratives of Wright and Hurston. Also born to a minister father, the young Malcolm is ‘confused and amazed’ by the workings of Christian worship (7). Whilst affected by its dramatics though, the narrator tells of an early and firm rejection of ‘the concept of Jesus as someone divine’ and a harbouring of ‘very little respect for most people who represented religion’ (7).

M.S. Handler’s introduction to the Autobiography suggests that Malcolm’s attitude to Christianity remained a negative one as regards racial liberation. For Handler, Malcolm characterized the religion as one ‘designed for slaves’, exploiting rather than liberating the black man and keeping him ‘in a subservient position’ (xi). As in Baldwin and most of the aforementioned autobiographies, this Christian scepticism is linked by Malcolm X’s narrator to the acts of reading and learning, particularly about world history (201-206). In particular, this process introduces the narrator to the concept of the white Christian colonial project; the way that, in his words, Christianity had been the ‘initial wedge in criminal conquests’ for the ‘collective white man’ in his guise of ‘piratical [opportunism]’ as civilized conversion (204). Echoing Baldwin’s ‘prolonged religious crisis’ in ‘Down at the Cross’ (27), Malcolm
X’s narrator faces a ‘psychological and spiritual crisis’ (242) and becomes a Muslim minister. However, the likenesses of this rhetorical process to the familiar tropes of black autobiographical tradition and the Christian conversion narrative underline one crucial difference. Namely, this difference is that the conversion in question is to an entirely different religion and accompanying set of beliefs. This bend in the norms of the spiritual liberation narrative indicates an increased contextual multiplicity within the meanings of spiritual liberation, in addition to the increased discussion of secular liberation as an alternative.

It is therefore evident from the above that the early to mid-twentieth century was an arena in which the spiritual dimension of black liberation was a topic of fierce literary debate. The autobiographical tradition of African American literature saw a variety of voices compete for power in the discussion of what attitude to spiritual faith would best accompany the liberation of the black American minority. Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’ is a useful exemplary text for viewing much of the presence of this debate in one text. The text offers a clear and coherent personal and contemplative critique of the spiritual liberation narratives available to the black population at the time, and a justified argument for the autobiographer’s ultimate rejection of spiritual faith in his social liberation theory. Nonetheless, it is clear from analysis of black autobiographical writing previous to ‘Down at the Cross’, that the secular liberation narrative outlined in Baldwin’s text was neither accident nor pure invention. Rather, it can be seen as part of a much broader literary evolution that slowly began to shape a discourse of mistrust of religion and spiritual faith as components of liberation theory.

There are distinct rhetorical patterns to be seen in Baldwin and his literary ancestors that indicate the existence of this trend. One key example is the increased recurrence of reading and learning, rather than religious experience, acting as routes to enlightenment. This is also frequently coupled with an increased learned understanding of the role of Christianity in legitimizing white colonial expansion and the African slave trade, leading to doubt in the potential usefulness of Christianity as a liberation device for black Americans. Furthermore, the voicing of Christian experiences through the veil of childhood innocence acts as a useful device for black autobiographers to establish a guise of naivety, while actually critiquing religion quite strongly. Inconsistencies in Christian logic and morality are the topics that most often come under scrutiny, not just in those deemed to be practicing the religion badly or hypocritically, but in the very core ideology of the religion.

Furthermore, like the slave narratives, these twentieth-century texts make adaptive use of the mores of the Christian conversion narrative and refigure them as Touchstone narratives.
Instead of portraying the conversion experience as a positive one, many of these writers focus on the disappointment, social pressure, trauma and unfulfilled promise that it represents. The narrators, often through the wise naivety of childhood narrative experience, stand alone in wonderment but confusion at the irrational and imposed goings-on around them from which they are either outwardly or inwardly excluded. The one positive experience of conversion as we discussed it in this chapter carries the subversive twist of having been adapted to suit the purposes of conversion to Islam rather than Christianity. This is therefore a rhetorical form that has seen visible conversion itself since the norms of the slave narrative. The last of these major rhetorical trends is the increased focus, most noteworthy in Hurston and Baldwin, on mistrusting religion for its insistence on the individual relinquishment of independent thought and agency.

The black autobiographers in these instances refuse to allow that the achievement of liberation is anyone else’s responsibility than their own. This therefore denies the religious institution and the spiritual deity access to their liberation narrative in favour of material action and secular thinking as a means to the same end. The concurrent evolutions in religious liberation narratives as demonstrated by the Christian and Islamic appeals to black freedom factor into this debate too. The extremity of discourse both within religious narratives and outside of these can be seen as serving to polarize the debate and stretch the interpretive literary potential of the spiritual liberation narrative. However, it is worth finally reiterating that this secular component was still couched within the religious realm, relying heavily on its language and discussion to frame an opposition. While, for example, Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’ represents a religious oppression narrative, it still pays a debt to the religious liberation narrative. Black autobiographical writing in Baldwin’s time had therefore come a long way from the mono-religious liberation rhetoric of the slave narrative, but also reinforced the dialectical potential for religion to represent both racial oppression and racial liberation at the same time.
Chapter 3: Ta-Nehisi Coates and the Contemporary Crisis of Identity

This third chapter of the thesis focuses on the position of the black autobiographical liberation narrative in contemporary American literature, especially as it can be identified in Ta-Nehisi Coates’s 2015 book *Between the World and Me*. In discussing this text, I will focus on the means by which it addresses the issue of black American liberation. This will involve comparing and contrasting Coates’s text and its literary environment with those of Douglass and Baldwin in Chapters 1 and 2 respectively. As before, my focus is on the religious dimension of the text, and how this compares with its literary ancestors in its employment of religious arguments and metaphorical textual constructions. While to an extent *Between the World and Me* can be seen to follow on in the black autobiographical traditions of its ancestors, it also helps to underline some of the important discursive shifts that characterize the contemporary moment as a unique one in the history of the first-person black liberation narrative mode.

As was the case with the previous chapter, it is necessary to recognise that evolutions in black autobiographical writing do not work in isolation, but are contingent on external societal change too. Of significance in the period between Baldwin’s and Coates’s times of writing are the increasingly globalised distribution of information and literature, as well as the increased diversity in media platforms through which literature can now operate. This has led to the increased availability of different texts, increased ease through which they can be both read and accessed, and increased competition between written text and visual and interactive media texts. Along with much artistic criticism, the field of literary studies has also experienced theoretical developments during this time, including the rise of the post-structuralist theories discussed in the introduction. Such theory is especially relevant in my discussion of the narrative properties of Coates’s text. Moreover, the fields of African American studies and Culture Studies that underpin this thesis began to flourish and meet increased recognition in the academy. All of these developments are relevant in the placing of *Between the World and Me* within a specific literary evolution and inform the direction of this chapter.
While Baldwin’s period is significant for its increased acceptance of the secular voice, it would seem uncontroversial to suggest that atheism has since become an increasingly more popular and accepted orientation in American culture. The rise of the New Atheists as a movement, including such hallmark texts as Sam Harris’s 2004 *The End of Faith* and Richard Dawkins’s 2006 *The God Delusion*, stands as evidence in support of this claim. However, Coates’s text and the critical reaction to it show that the subject of religion is still a major concern of its narrative and context. Moreover, critics have also recognised notable changes in black American autobiographical writing in the last fifty years that are directly relevant to my theme of spiritualised liberation rhetoric. Rampersad noted in 1983 that fewer African American autobiographies, and more biographies about African Americans, were being published at that time. The reason for this change, according to Rampersad, was a broad decline in the ‘religious imperative,’ that up until that time had driven all Western autobiography (qtd. in Weixlmann 392). What Rampersad suggests is that the decline in writing of African American autobiographies is explicitly linked to the decline of religion as the major foundation of the form and subject matter of these texts. He therefore underlines the importance of religion as a literary device for black autobiographers, and suggests that the genre struggled to survive without it. Similarly, in 1988 O’Neale emphasised Baldwin’s place at this point of transition, calling him ‘the last black American writer to exploit as a major theme the black man’s relationship with Christianity’ (140).

In the contemporary moment of *Between the World and Me*, it certainly seems to be true that the published book-length autobiographical narrative is not the standard platform for expressing the black American experience that it was in the respective eras of Douglass’s *Narrative* and Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’. It is difficult to place Coates’s text within a contemporary black autobiographical moment, as there are not enough texts that could be said to share this moment with it. It is perhaps easiest to exemplify this point by underlining the number of long-serving and influential modern black writers, who have notably neglected to release any primarily autobiographical work. The widely acclaimed black author Toni Morrison, for example, has released several fictional and non-fictional works but nothing autobiographical in form. Nor have the prominent race studies and African American studies scholars Hortense Spillers, bell hooks or Sikivu Hutchinson. This makes *Between the World and Me* a somewhat unusual literary text within its cultural, historical context.

A blurb for *Between the World and Me* claims that the book addresses America’s ‘fraught racial history’ and explores the black individual’s experience of operating under
racially oppressive social conditions. Through ‘personal narrative’, claims the blurb, Coates offers ‘a transcendent vision for a way forward’ (back cover). This aligns *Between the World and Me* with the previous black autobiographies discussed in this thesis, in its shared emphasis on discussing black freedom and oppression. Reviews and other commentary on *Between the World and Me* have drawn parallels between Coates and Baldwin in terms of both literary form and content. Following the publication of the text, Toni Morrison described Coates as worthy of filling the ‘intellectual void’ that was created following Baldwin’s death (qtd. in Wallace-Wells). *Between the World and Me* demonstrates, for Wallace-Wells, Baldwin’s ‘direct and exhortative prose’. Furthermore, McFadden writes that ‘Coates’ debt to Baldwin is quite explicit’ and that *Between the World and Me* is ‘in the same mode’ as *The Fire Next Time*, a text designed to ‘wake you up’. Coates himself has on several occasions mentioned the influence of *The Fire Next Time* on *Between the World and Me* and his writing and beliefs in general (see for example ‘Ta-Nehisi Coates on Fear and the Black Experience’).

There are several formal similarities between *The Fire Next Time* and *Between the World and Me*, that justify indebting the latter to the former. We will discuss later in the chapter the ‘direct and exhortative prose’ identified by Wallace-Wells above. Moreover, there are significant similarities in the structural narrative properties of the two texts, beyond that of the broader traditions of African-American autobiography. Coates’s narrator writes from the perspective of a father issuing a confessional autobiographical warning to his son; that is to say, as the author of an extended, didactic message to a single, juvenile narrate. In this, Coates’s narrative shares parallels with Baldwin’s ‘My Dungeon Shook’, the companion essay to ‘Down at the Cross’ in *The Fire Next Time*. This too is a missive written as though from the autobiographical Baldwin to his young nephew, carrying a similar warning of the dangers faced as a black individual in the United States.

This structural similarity has been noted by many readers and reviewers as evidence of the literary influence of Baldwin, and especially *The Fire Next Time*, on Coates’s *Between the World and Me* (e.g. Wallace-Wells; McFadden; Adams). However, it is also worth noting that the title of the latter references Richard Wright’s 1936 poem ‘Between the World and Me’ and its epigraph quotes lines from this poem. Wright’s poem graphically depicts the lynching of the black narrator, and bears thematic resemblance to Coates’s representation of the violence and brutality of the white state towards its black citizens. The phrase ‘between the world and me’ also appears in Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’ (42) and in Frantz Fanon’s seminal 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* (97). Coates’s individual debt to the legacies of
such major writers as Baldwin and Wright is therefore noteworthy. However, so too is the recognition, as we discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, that black literature developed its own language as a collective effort to negotiate the uniquely subjugated position of its writers. This is the shared vocabulary that Coates draws on when he uses such allusion to individual works.

Significantly, though, Coates goes on to note that he ‘didn’t come out of the church’ and therefore lacks ‘an intuitive understanding of what religion gives to people’. Here Coates talks specifically about ‘liberation’, insisting that it is an act that is ‘ultimately always physical’ (‘Fear and the Black Experience). Coates’s point is that ‘you are your body’, and that there can be no separation between damage done to the body and that done to the mind and soul. Coates therefore claims to harbour a physical, non-spiritual, mode of discussing the achievement of liberation for black Americans. He remarks that this ‘probably marks [his] writing’ and his rejection of the idea of the moral arc of the universe bending towards justice. Elsewhere, he has remarked that ‘physicality and chaos’ characterize his background, and that Christian optimism was simply ‘not there’ (qtd. in Wallace-Wells). This underlines a crucial difference between the contextual origin of Coates’s authorship and that of the autobiographers discussed in Chapter 2 (Baldwin, Wright, Hurston, Malcolm X, and King). Coates’s personal history lacks the familial Christian upbringing, and minister-father so prominent in the lives and works of these other authors. This thesis even quoted Baldwin’s own identical phrasing of his ‘coming out of the church’ in Chapter 2 (Baldwin qtd. in O’Neale 129).

Most critics have remarked upon the atheism of Coates and how this translates into the literary rhetoric of *Between the World and Me*. Some argue that this atheistic tone works to complement the book’s commentary on America’s racial issues. The self-described ‘humanist celebrant’ Bob Diven, for example, argues that Coates’s ‘godlessness’ and ‘profound humanist viewpoint’ underpin his book, but that his atheism is ‘overshadowed by the discussion around his racial arguments’ (Diven). Furthermore, Greg Epstein, the current humanist chaplain at Harvard University, writes that the humanist narrative of *Between the World and Me* ‘woke [him] up’ to his white privilege (Epstein). Epstein suggests that Coates’s book is not only about atheism and humanism, but is in fact ‘the quintessential atheist and humanist text of [his] generation’. Others read in more nuanced tones the effect of the text’s secularism on its discussion of black American liberty. Wallace-Wells asserts that Coates’s atheism is the ‘heavy force’ in the text, making it ‘unique and bleak’ and giving his
writing ‘urgency’, encouraging immediate, material focus on the ‘security of African-American bodies’. His position, writes Wallace Wells, is that ‘religion is blindness’, and that when talk of ‘hope and dreams and faith and progress’ are stripped away, white supremacy in the United States remains and leaves ‘no great reason to conclude that the future will be better than the past’.

The above criticism suggests that Coates’s secular critique of religion in favour of the immediate materialist imperative is a positive device in terms of its literary power, but one that risks pessimism and undermines the possibility of gleaning positive theoretical or practical solutions to the problems posed. Some critics develop this accusation of pessimism in Coates’s humanism and materialism to greater lengths, arguing that it denies the imagined possibility of black American liberation. Ronald Smith, for example, suggests that Between the World and Me substitutes religion for ‘a sort of anti-religion built on a rigorous certitude about the impossibility of salvation’ (25). Other critics suggest that there is more spirituality in the text than is initially apparent, and that the text does in fact appeal to the spiritual, as well as the material, liberation theme. Theological scholar Daniel José Camacho, for example, recognises that the atheistic whole of Between the World and Me would seem to run directly against the spiritual dimension of the American race problem. Nevertheless, Camacho argues that he, as a religious person, found the text ‘deeply insightful and helpful’ in considering the role of ‘faith’ within the realm of ‘race, society, and U.S. history’. Adams argues, furthermore that Coates’s atheism also reflects cadences of religious oratory, along with the voices of Baldwin, Wright and the ‘verbal inventiveness’ of hip-hop.

There has therefore been a great deal of discussion regarding the way that the concept of faith operates in Between the World and Me. Some suggest that its atheism and physical focus are at the core of its narrative drive and make it the unique modern liberation narrative that it is. Others suggest that at the heart of Coates’s atheism is an underlying spirituality and reliance on the tropes of traditional, Christian modes of expression. Furthermore, the question remains as to whether a black autobiographical text such as Between the World and Me can still be considered a liberation narrative, if it lacks any spiritual figuration of the concept of freedom. My analysis in Chapters 1 and 2 identified that this spiritualized framing of liberation has historically been a crucial narrative device for black autobiographers to clarify and realise their literary purposes. If Coates has abandoned this narrative mode, we might ask, what has replaced it and how does this look? This is one of the driving questions that underlines my following analysis of the text.
Let us first explore the form and language Coates’s narrator uses to portray his humanism and atheism within *Between the World and Me*. Coates’s autobiographer addresses the issue of his religion at infrequent but important points in the narrative, usually with either dismissal or scorn. His family, asserts the narrator, ‘rejected’ and ‘spurned’ the dogmas and values of the church (28). The autobiographer unequivocally asserts his early rejection, or lack of, spiritual faith by emphasising in its place a ‘physical … understanding of the universe’ with a ‘moral arc [that] bent towards chaos then concluded in a box’ (28). Evident here is a hyperbolic register, that can also be found in both Douglass and Baldwin. Note Coates’s use of such extreme verbs as ‘spurned’ in describing religious experience (28), where Baldwin similarly describes his being ‘hurl[ed]’ into the church (38). Coates’s worldview is averse to the idea of divine justice or morality. For Coates, ‘The meek were battered in West Baltimore, stomped out at Walbrook Junction, bashed up at Park Heights, and raped in the showers of the city jail’ (28). This passage demonstrates the way Coates, like both Douglass and Baldwin, appeals to the emotions through visceral language and imagery. Furthermore, it shows the circular construction of clauses that render Coates’s language a frequently oratorical quality: ‘battered [verb] in [preposition] West Baltimore [common noun/location]. The overall effect is that of the sermonic, exhortative mode that also is used for emphasis in Baldwin’s and Douglass’s texts. It is therefore apparent in Coates’s most explicit rejections of religion, that he nonetheless draws on the religiously sourced literary conventions of his ancestors in expressing this atheistic base.

In addition to identifying as an atheist in the above passage, Coates’s symmetrical syntactic deployment of pronouns creates a distance and detachment between his family and church-goers. ‘We would not stand for their anthems. We would not kneel before their God’, he asserts (p. 28, emphasis added). This is reminiscent of the polarising language in Douglass’s *Narrative* by which that narrator defines the two oppositions of ‘good pure, and holy’ Christianity and ‘bad, corrupt, and wicked’ slaveholding religion (75). In Coates’s narrative, the two oppositions established are the atheist self and the religious other. This faith-oriented binary reoccurs throughout Coates’s text in various forms, serving to separate and distance the narrator from other black, religious characters he encounters. The narrator expresses this distance ambiguously, as both empowering and alienating. On one hand, the narrator implies the superiority of his atheism, his ‘rejection of a Christian God’, by describing this as being ‘raised conscious’ (79). There are undertones of pride in his assertion
of his belief that ‘our bodies are ourselves, that [his] soul is the voltage conducted through neurons and nerves, and that [his] spirit is his flesh’ (79).

The ‘greatest reward’, as the narrator puts it, of this physically-oriented, non-spiritual, upbringing was that he was ‘freed to truly consider how [he] wished to live … in [his] black body’ (12). On the other hand, this detachment from his black, religious comrades is often conveyed as a source of shame, guilt and doubt for the narrator. His rejection of the idea of ‘forgiveness’ as anything other than ‘irrelevant’ causes him to feel like a ‘heretic’ among the mourners at a funeral (79). Moreover, his encounter with the ‘exceptional’ – and deeply religious – Mabel Jones leaves him in awe of her ‘power and rectitude’ (138-139). This leaves him wondering if his estrangement from the church has caused him to ‘[miss] something, some notion of cosmic hope, some wisdom beyond [his] mean physical perception of the world, something beyond the body’ (139). Early in the narrative, Coates is repulsed by the blind faith driven passivism of black activists in the Civil Rights Movement; the way they seemed to ‘love the worst things in life … the dogs that rent their children apart … the men who raped them, the women who cursed them’ (32). However, later his tone borders on that of envy in discussing what he calls the ‘armor’ that belief in God provided these black activists, giving them ‘focus’ (142). This ‘armor’ is real, asserts Coates, but out of reach for the non-believing narrator. The loss here is therefore overwhelmingly Coates’s. While he echoes Douglass in his creation of a religious binary, the poles of “religious” and “non-religious” are more nuanced than Douglass’s “good” and “bad” religion. Atheism is both a source of superiority and pride for Coates’s narrator and a site of estrangement and loss. While Coates’s atheist voice is therefore dependent on the rhythms and cadences of the religious mode traditionally associated with black autobiographical writing, he re-expresses these forms with a more ambiguous personal signature. I hold this ambiguous dimension of Coates’ prose as an attempt resist straightforward, binary interpretation, and therefore highlight the influence of post-structuralist literary on his work.

As well as identifying as a troubled atheist, Coates can be seen to express his critique of American racism by symbolically repositioning “race” as a matter of “faith”. Coates makes whiteness a choice by portraying his enemies not as white Americans but as ‘those Americans who believe that they are white’ (6). This is a turn of phrase that Coates has acknowledged as a loan from Baldwin, and that particularly struck him due to its emphasis on the ‘human agency’ in the creation of race (‘Fear and the Black Experience’). Coates characterizes Americans who live in such belief in the value of whiteness as ‘Dreamers’ (151). As such,
'the Dream' is established as what Wallace-Wells describes as one of the text’s ‘controlling metaphors’. Coates’s depictions of the Dream are often oblique; appearing as metaphorical, sensory images, rather than direct description. This impressionistic narrative imperative is important and will be returned to. The Dream, in Coates’s language, is ‘perfect houses with nice lawns … Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways … treehouses and Cub Scouts … [It] smells like peppermint but tastes like strawberry shortcake’ (11). Coates therefore builds his broader metaphor of the Dream on smaller metaphorical cultural fragments of idyllic American life. The result is something similar to what is colloquially known as the American Dream, but repackaged in a racialized frame.

Coates subsequent critique of Dreamers is that their faith in the Dream is in fact nothing more than delusion. Its principles, Coates argues, ‘[war] with the known world’ (11). While it is tempting, he writes, to ‘fold [his] country over [his] head like a blanket’ and accept the Dream, this is made impossible by knowing that it ‘rests on our [black peoples’] backs, the bedding made from our bodies’ (11). For Coates’s narrator, American history shows the truth of this latter assertion, and the delusion inherent in the Dream (5-6). It demands that present-day Americans forget the profits of slavery, electoral exclusion and segregation, because remembering would ‘tumble them out of the beautiful Dream and force them to live … down here in the world’ (143). Coates therefore rejects the subscription to the illusions and inaccuracies of American history as the Dream presents them, favouring instead a focus on “real” American history. This genuine history, for Coates, demonstrates that America is built on the oppression of black Americans. As such, the Dream represents Coates’s entire metaphorical figuration of the underlying, self-reinforcing mechanism of American racism.

By presenting the Dream as a false religion, Coates echoes Baldwin’s critique of the fallacy in viewing religious institutions as sites of freedom and safety. Like Baldwin, Coates dismisses belief in a Dream as an act of denial and escapism. However, Coates broadens out Baldwin’s critique of specific religious institutions and applies the idea of belief to that of faith in the American Dream as a whole. Moreover, Coates’s figuration of the Dream as the root of American oppression can be seen in some ways as an almost complete reversal of Douglass’s reverent presentation of the American Dream as a site of salvation. We discussed in Chapter 1 Andrews’s characterization of Douglass’s Narrative as an ‘American Jeremiad’. Andrews asserts that as such Douglass’s Narrative glorified the ‘dream of America as a land of freedom and opportunity’ while critiquing the ‘nightmare’ of the American South (164).
Where the American Dream was therefore a concept of religious liberation for Douglass, for Coates it represents a religious site of racist oppression.

Ascribing a religious component to the Dream – his primary target of critique – serves Coates well for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it unifies and lends shape to an otherwise vague concept. Coates writes the notion of democracy as ‘God’ for Americans; their questioning of democracy therefore as standing ‘in defiance of their God’ (6). Equally, he is able to portray what he holds as the American crimes committed in the name of democracy – ‘torture, theft, enslavement’ – as ‘heresies’ (p. 6). This polarises a more complex political spectrum of ideas and behaviour and presents them as binary alternatives. These alternatives are of delusional faith in the American Dream, or of honesty – accepting America’s racist history. This polarization in its turn creates a landscape of good and bad moral behaviour and a population of heroes and villains. Perhaps most usefully, though, it changes the central component of this villainy from a matter of race to a matter of faith. We noted in Chapter 1 how Douglass performed a similar linguistic act by casting pro-slavery characters as “bad Christians” and anti-slavery characters as “good Christians”. In Douglass, this is a reasonably simple alignment due to the relatively straightforward relationship between the “problem” of slavery and the “solution” of individual emancipation from, and the general abolition of, slavery.

Coates’s negotiation of problems and solutions is more complicated, as his conceptualization of American racism works on a more hidden cultural level. This in turn broadens out the nature of the villainy at hand and positions it more deeply in its perpetrators. Many of his villains are in fact black individuals themselves, such as the police officer killer of Prince Jones – a character we will discuss further below (83). However, Coates renders the behaviour of this character centrally contingent on the character’s faith in the Dream – his ‘belief’ that he is white – to keep him accountable on racial grounds. Coates therefore refigures race as a faith to make individual race irrelevant in the discussion of American racism. This reduces individual racist villainy, while emphasising the sins of the nation as a collective in reinforcing racist culture. Destruction of the black body, as Coates puts it, is not ‘the fault of any human but the fault of some unfortunate but immutable fact of “race,” imposed upon an innocent country by the inscrutable judgment of invisible gods’ (83, italics added). By representing subscription to the Dream as an act of faith, Coates is therefore able to write a critique of a complex and apparently self-contradictory social problem in a metaphorical frame, that is at once sophisticated and consistent. Furthermore, he is able to
hold his racist villains to account, whilst softening the blow by positioning their actions in a mechanism that functions beyond human control.

Coates’s establishment of racist villains, therefore reflects Douglass’s literary methods, while adapting them to suit his own cultural-historical context. Where Douglass’s slave victims were at the mercy of the hypocritical faith of their masters, Coates’s black American victims meet tragedy as a result of the faithful delusions of the majority of Dreamers. Coates’s employment of the sentimental mode in portraying these victims is also reminiscent of Douglass. The character Prince Jones, a young black man killed by a black police officer, is arguably the most unequivocally polarised of these tragic victims in *Between the World and Me*. Coates heightens the pathos surrounding this character in his introduction; referring to a newspaper portrait of him as an opportunity to render his description in especially visual strokes. ‘I saw him there’, recalls the narrator, thereby inviting the shared gaze of the reader. ‘He [Jones] was dressed in his formal clothes. … His face was lean, brown, and beautiful’ (77). Coates extends this visual pathos by realising episodically the character of Jones in an idyllic literary montage. ‘Think’ urges the narrator, ‘of all the love poured into [Jones]. … Think of the time spent regulating sleepovers. Think of the surprise birthday parties’ (81). The repetition of the word ‘think’ in its imperative grammatical form renders an instructive quality, as well as providing another example of the sermonic mode in Coates’s rhetoric. The overall result is an increasingly dramatic immediacy with which this imagery registers, which therefore increases its sympathetic effect. As with the casting of Prince Jones as a tragic, innocent victim of American racism, Coates’s language choices within this functional characterization find its roots in the traditional, religious literary conventions of slave narratives. At such moments in his narrative, Coates abandons the indirect, ambiguous imperative and commits to the polarized language of religiously infused sentimentality.

Coates’s tendencies to draw on such literary conventions invite similar criticisms to those that have been aimed at Douglass and Baldwin. As in the respective texts of these writers, Coates’s representation of women in *Between the World and Me* is problematic. Let us introduce this argument by first looking at Coates’s representation of his male characters and voices. We mentioned previously that *Between the World and Me* reflects the structure of Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* in its targeting of a young, male relative as autobiographical narratee. Coates addresses his son Samori directly in his text, devoting its first line simply to the word ‘[s]on’ (5). This packages the whole of the following text in the form of an extended
letter. The result is personalising and emphasising the relationship between male narrator and male addressee. When Coates therefore writes of protecting the ‘black body’ (12), the reader invariably reads this as Samori’s black body. Coates extends the narrative function of Samori’s presence by also casting him as character within the text’s anecdotal autobiographical dimension, as well as its implied audience. Two episodes are of relevance here for demonstrating the way the narrator casts Samori as a character in order to exemplify his own ‘insecurity in his ability to protect [Samori’s] black body’ (94). In the first of these, the narrator conveys the urge to ‘grab [Samori] by the arm … [and] pull [him] back’, when he runs to play with other children at a nursery (91-92). The second, expresses the narrator’s anger, shock and ultimate feeling of helplessness at seeing Samori being pushed by a white woman in a crowd of similarly hostile white witnesses (93-94). Here Samori simultaneously represents the physically characterised object of Coates’s discourse and the implied audience persona for whom it is intended to be heard. Samori therefore occupies a doubled narrative and characteristic space within the text, with the result of giving him an especially enlarged presence within it.

These literary techniques may be effective in bringing the male narrator, Samori and the male black body to the foreground of the narrative. However, this invariably begs the question of what is pushed to the margins to create this space. It is possible to argue that the answer to this question is the female body and voice. In Chapter 1, I discussed McDowell’s claim that Douglass’s Narrative and its historical, critical discussion are both guilty of helping to emancipate the black male at the expense of the black female. In support of this point, McDowell discusses the silencing of Douglass’s wife, Anne Murray, in his Narrative despite her historically crucial financial role in securing Douglass’s freedom from slavery (175-176). McDowell’s point is all too easily applicable to Coates’s text as well. The wife of the autobiographer has an implied importance within the text; she is after all the mother of the quite evidently important narratee, Samori. Nevertheless, her actual narrative presence is extremely subdued. Coates introduces her to the reader, briefly relating the circumstances of their meeting at Howard University. He also voices sympathy and disgust for the specific challenges she faces as a black woman consistently confronted with racialized sexist stereotypes. Such stereotypes include the idea that as a child ‘she had better be smart because her looks wouldn’t save her’, and as a young woman that ‘she was really pretty for a dark skinned girl’ (65).
Nevertheless, Coates voices these complaints from his own narrative perspective, allowing his wife little to no space to speak for herself by way of her own introduction. Moreover, he repeatedly names her ‘the girl from Chicago’, rather than using her actual name (64). This may be seen as an attempt at affecting an air of mystery and romance about her persona within the encounter. However, it is relevant that the literary act of re-naming is well recognised as a semantic act of dominance and ownership, particularly in discussion of the sub-humanisation of African slaves (see for example Spillers). In this way Coates’s wife, recast as ‘Chicago girl’, becomes his literary property as well as a stereotyped, simplified version of herself. His disjointed, physical description of her fits in with this pattern, focusing on her ‘plum-painted lips’ and ‘long elegant fingers’ with little idea of a cohesive physical set of features, let alone any idea of the nature of her personality (64). The contrast between this characterisation and his aforementioned attention to the face of the autobiographically minor character Prince Jones is stark. After this introduction, Coates’s places his wife in the implied margins of the text. Here she largely stays, apart from flashing into being in brief passing references from the narrator. In one such reference, Coates’, consciously or otherwise, gives away his conception of her proper role – that of silent, unseen support to the text’s male protagonists. In telling her of his fears in visiting France, writes Coates, ‘[s]he just listened and held my hand’ (121).

It would not be fair to suggest that Coates’s narrative is unequivocally sexist or completely suppressive of its female dimension. The nuances within this element of the text are usefully explored in his characterization of Dr. Mabel Jones, the mother of Prince Jones. Unlike that of his wife, Coates’s study of Dr. Jones’s character is both detailed and balanced. His use of her full name and professional title is noteworthy in itself. Moreover, his narrative introduction to her physical presence is vivid and full of personal adjectives, that do justice both to her appearance, emotional qualities and mannerisms. He writes initially that ‘[s]he was ‘lovely, polite, brown … well composed … smiling through pained eyes’ (136) and later ‘reserved’ with ‘iron in her eyes’ (138). Coates also fills out her character by elaborating on what he calls her ‘exceptional life’, including her ‘full scholarship’ to college, time at ‘med school’ and in the Navy, and her work in radiology (139-140).

In addition to detailing the image of Dr. Jones, Coates also gives her a voice. His decision to frequently voice her through direct speech is significant in itself, as this allows for momentary shifts from the narrator’s focalization to Jones’s own. There are many examples of this strategy, but a significant one sees Coates’s quoting Jones as though a verbatim
monologue in an indented paragraph (137). The linguistic rhythms of this speech carry a consistent, personalised assuredness too. Examples include such phrases as ‘[m]y mother and I were going into the city’ and ‘[w]e were very poor, and most of the black people around us, who I knew were very poor also’ (137). The language is pointed and deliberate, rendering it convincing that this is Dr. Jones’s own voice, free from Coates’s intrusion or rewording. This is a far cry from both Douglass’s and Baldwin’s tendencies to mono-vocally overwhelm or silence the female voice and objectify the female body. It is more reminiscent of Harriet Jacobs’s multivocal narrative fairness, as I discussed in Chapter 1.

However, in other ways Coates still betrays the tendency to stereotype even such major female characters as Dr. Jones. It is also important that the root of this stereotyping goes back to that which I discussed above regarding Coates’s binary construction of the atheist self and the religious other. Dr. Jones, as I noted above, is cast firmly in this latter category in Coates’s narrative. Her experiences in the church as a child invoke a feeling of alienation in the narrator, underlining his ‘distance from an institution that has, so often, been the only support for our people’ (139). Coates chooses Dr. Jones to represent this reverent Christianity, despite the suggestion that ‘new black atheists are more likely than ever to be women’ (Cameron). Cameron puts this down, at least in part, to the recent feminist challenge to the black community’s ‘politics of respectability’, which has demanded since the 1900s that black women be ‘chaste, temperate, industrious … socially conservative [and above all] religious’, so as to always portray the race ‘in the best light’.

Cameron refers specifically to the scholar Sikivu Hutchinson as a notable example of a modern female leader of black atheist discourse. Journalist Kimberly Winston also cites Hutchinson for her support of the recognition of black atheists in the historical black social struggle (Winston). Hutchinson’s 2012 article ‘Black Churches and Blue-Eyed Jesuses’ demonstrates much of her influence on new black atheist thought. Recounting, much like Coates, her experiences of social estrangement as a result of growing up in a ‘rare secular African-American household’, Hutchinson questions the purpose of forcing religious morality onto children raised by secular moral codes. The only effect of prayer, as Hutchinson sees it, within the complex morality of human existence, is to offer ‘a quick and dirty escape hatch from the messy human circumstance of immoral acts’. Prayer, for Hutchinson, is therefore ‘a moral device, a tool, a treadmill’ that gives the individual ‘a temporary pass for not actually doing something in the real world or fundamentally changing one’s perceptions of “others”’. 73
In a similar vein, Annalise Fonza’s 2013 article ‘Black Women, Atheist Activism, and Human Rights’ stands up for the efforts of black, female scholars to ‘eradicate hate in the form of anti-atheist prejudice’. Fonza critiques the treatment of women that is prescribed by such religions as Islam, such as the practices of ‘hijab’ – covering of the female body – and ‘female circumcision’ (192-193, emphasis in original), in addition to asserting the societally legitimized negativity and prejudice faced by women wanting to leave a religion and become atheist (194). Fonza also writes of the special estrangement and prejudice faced by black American woman atheists within a predominantly Christian community (194), and supports the work of such black woman atheists such as Hutchinson to express their non-religious narrative at the risk of ‘distrust and exclusion’ (194-195). However, Fonza concludes that it is this expression of their atheism that has set them free from the intersectional oppression of patriarchal dominance and religious dogma (195-196). It is therefore evident that such female black atheist scholars have played an important role in both expressing a contemporary atheist discourse and defending it on the grounds of its status as a social liberation narrative for people of non-belief.

Nonetheless, in Between the World and Me Dr. Jones is at once the only fully developed female character and also a firm stereotype of the aforementioned dated expectation of religious, black female propriety. It can therefore hardly be said that the text really does justice to the recent atheist female challenge to these conventions. While Coates portrays Dr. Jones far more respectfully than both Douglass and Baldwin cast their female characters, this characterization is still somewhat limited by its reliance on dated religious female stereotypes. His pathos and reverence for her composure in the face of tragedy is all too reminiscent of Douglass’s female slave victims; pious Christians, passive and helpless in the face of oppression. Despite some exceptions, I would therefore argue that overall it is the overwhelming male presence, in the form of the narrator and his son – Samori – that remains Coates’s subject in discussing the black experience. Women are largely side-lined, objectified and stereotyped in the traditional manner of the religious, male liberation narrative. Coates therefore draws on this religious tradition more than may be initially apparent.

We have discussed some ways in which Coates’s humanist autobiographical form draws on the imagery and metaphors of spiritual patterns of autobiography. However, it is also worth exploring some more of these metaphors in terms of the way in which their spiritualisation affects semantic meaning. A useful example here is the way in which Coates connects figurations of liberation and oppression to the different physical settings in which he
locates his narrative. This is arguably one of the more self-evident literary devices that thematically links the narrative drives of Douglass, Baldwin and Coates. In all three texts, the narrators find themselves threatened by their current setting and subsequently seek escape to safety. For Douglass’s narrator, the threat is that of the brutality and abuse of slavery. His act of escape is therefore to a great extent a physical, geographical one. In the setting of the slaveholding South, he is doomed to bondage; in the northern city of New Bedford, he finds legal emancipation and therefore physical protection (71).

Baldwin takes Douglass’s idea of escape from the threat of a location and re-figures the threat concept symbolically, as that presented by institutional settings. I mentioned in Chapter 2, how Baldwin’s narrator flees to the safety of the church to escape the threat represented by the setting of ‘the Avenue’. The two ‘settings’ are figurative rather than physical, but the act of escape from danger to safety is metaphorically equivalent. Moreover, in writing these acts of escape, both Baldwin and Douglass draw heavily on religious literary components in their presentation. Douglass draws on the tropes of conversion narratives and spiritual autobiographies, and the prosody of spiritual deliverance, to grant his text an extra, meta-physical signification of “escape” as “salvation”. Baldwin flips this figuration on its head, ultimately calling out the limitations of both the Christian church and the Nation of Islam in providing the refuge that they promise. Baldwin’s conception of liberation is therefore the rejection of “escape” in place of self-reliance and liberated independent thought.

Firstly, it must be recognised that Coates draws interesting parallels to both Douglass and Baldwin in his representation of the threat represented by his particular environmental setting. There are clear parallels to be drawn between the fear that Baldwin’s narrator finds in ‘the Avenue’ and the fear that permeates Coates’s autobiographical retelling of his experience growing up in Baltimore. Coates’s fear is drawn into being through a number of different socio-cultural symbols that vaguely represent a microcosm of black America in general in his neighbourhood in particular. It is present, for example, in ‘the first music [he] ever knew’, the ‘brutal language and hard gaze’ of local youths, and in ‘the sting of [his father’s] black leather belt’ (15). In many ways, this is a symbolic fear of a setting for the cultural dangers that it represents. It is a large, deep fear, argues Coates, that found its roots in slavery and ‘echoed down through the ages’ (136). However, Coates also echoes Douglass in his emphasis on the physical in this conceptualized fear of setting. The fear is embodied in the character he refers to as ‘[t]he boy with the small eyes’ (19). Coates’s narrator asserts how he saw in the boy’s eyes ‘a surging rage that could, in an instant, erase [the narrator’s] body’. The power of the
boy is such, Coates puts it, that he holds ‘[Coates’s] entire body in his small hands’ (19). The small-eyed boy therefore evokes Douglass’s slaveholding villains in his complete physical mastery of the narrator’s black body. Here Coates therefore weaves a very physical immediacy into his conception of fear, in amongst the more symbolic cultural fear that lurks in the corners of his Baltimore setting.

Coates therefore demonstrably employs both physical and symbolic dimensions in his conceptualization of setting-based fear and escape. However, I would like to suggest that the effect of Coates’s writing is strongly affected by the presence of religious metaphors in these figurations. I wish to present two examples to support this argument, each representing spiritual and physical figurations of “escape” respectively. The first of these is Coates’s metaphorical portrayal of the black community at Howard University as his ‘Mecca’ (39). Coates figures ‘The Mecca’ as the ‘crossroads of the black diaspora … a machine, crafted to capture and concentrate the dark energy of all African peoples and inject it directly into the student body’ (40). This is therefore a place where black students can find ‘power’ as a source of freedom (40). The use of the Islamic allusion to Mecca, rather than a Christian equivalent, is perhaps in homage to Malcolm X, who we discussed in Chapter 2. As previously noted, Malcolm X was an outspoken supporter of the Nation of Islam. Moreover, Coates’s narrator references the influence of Malcolm X on his thinking in the pages leading up to his introduction of the ‘Mecca’ metaphor (36-37). In this metaphorical conceptualization, Coates therefore borrows from the religious symbolism of Islam to present his Mecca as a place of sanctity and a site of black liberation.

The second example, representing Coates’s presentation of “escape” in physical terms, is that of his discussion of the sense of freedom he finds in the city of Paris. Coates’s narrator writes enviously of watching Parisian teenagers gathering by the river Seine; ‘thinking how much [he] would have loved for that to have been [his] life, how much [he] would have loved to have a past apart from the fear’ (125). The narrator is baffled by the generosity of a – presumably French – acquaintance, assuming that the kindness of the acquaintance constitutes ‘some elaborate ritual to get an angle on [the narrator]’ (126). This confusion is again ascribed by the narrator to his having ‘missed part of the experience [of the encounter]’; his having been ‘blindfolded by fear’ while growing up in Baltimore’ (126). Coates's language is that of yearning for an impossible autobiographical past. Moreover, the narrator wishes this life, ‘apart from fear’, was a possibility for the narratee, Samori (125). In *Between the World and Me*, “Paris”, like “the Mecca”, therefore comes to represent both a liberated place and a
metaphorical, textual site of liberation. The difference is that “Paris” lacks the spiritual component and allusive force afforded by the Islamic source of “the Mecca”. The former can therefore be seen as a reinterpretation of the same liberated “place”, but presented purely as a potential site of physical liberation, rather than its spiritualized equivalent.

There are clear similarities between the ways that “the Mecca” and “Paris” function as metaphors in the text. However, I uphold that the key difference in their impact comes from the level of clarity offered by the spiritualized “escape” of “the Mecca”, as compared with the ambiguity and contradictory meanings within its metaphorical representation in “Paris”. As the aforementioned scene at the river Seine demonstrates, Coates’s narrative perspective is often that of witness and passive bystander. Additionally, the voice of this witness-narrator often carries a lightness of touch, presenting metaphor and imagery without forcing obvious meaning or bias into its interpretation. The advantage of this effect, as discussed above with regard to characterization, is that of narrative objectivity and increased ‘fairness’ when compared with such texts as Douglass’s Narrative. The disadvantage is that it can be difficult to determine a unifying purpose to these scenes within the narrative aims of the text as a whole. Most significantly, it can be unclear what Coates actually presents as the causes of and solutions to American racial oppression - in other words, his unifying liberation theory.

Coates’s narrative ambivalence makes the value of his “Mecca” metaphor a complex quantity; its aforementioned ‘power’ a vague entity. The witness-narrator ascribes this to the variety of blackness represented by the students at Howard University, describing this as ‘everything [he] knew of [his] black self multiplied out into seemingly endless variations’ (40). Individually characterized examples of this variety include the following:

- Nigerian aristocrats in their business suits … bald-headed Qs in purple windbreakers and tan Timbs … AME preachers debating the clerics of Ausar-Set … California girls turned Muslim, born anew, in hijab and long skirt … Ponzi schemers and Christian cultists (40).

The senses of variety and idiosyncrasy in this sprawl are clear. However, there is little that connects in any physical, material way the discrete individuals that he presents as examples of what he calls the ‘dark energy of all African peoples’ (41). It is the religious figuration that forges this connection. The purposeful, symbolic nomenclature of “Mecca” conveys to the reader a sense of shared community value as well as a place of “pilgrimage” where this value can be realized and enjoyed without compromise. The deployment of a religious metaphor
therefore serves as a mode by which Coates sharpens his imagery and makes his figuration of
the “Mecca” as “escape” more unified and concrete.

As for “Paris”, the absence of a religious metaphorical frame renders an unresolved
and even contradictory quality to the setting as a site of “escape”. On one hand Paris
represents a solution to the racial problems faced by Coates’s narrator in America. Coates
frames this especially as a solution for Samori; a return trip to Paris is inscribed as ‘above all
because of [him]’ (125). The goal in showing Samori Paris is described as ‘put[ting] as much
distance between you and that blinding fear as possible’; allowing him to ‘see different people
living by different rules’ (126-127). This is therefore an act of physical escape from the fear
underlining one setting to the liberation represented by another. Coates invokes Douglass and
slave narratives, asserting that he and his family ‘were not enslaved in France … our colour
was not our distinguishing feature there’ (127). Paris therefore represents a site of escape
from American racism for Samori and, as he represents this group, the future generation of
black America.

However, Coates does not allow “Paris” to stand as an untarnished symbol of escape
and freedom. The narrator holds France accountable for what he describes as its own ‘national
project of theft by colonization’ (127). He and his family are not ‘their particular “problem”
nor their national guilt’ (128). Nonetheless, the narrator sees that ‘the forces that held back
our [black people’s] bodies back at home were not unrelated to those that had given France its
wealth’ (128). The narrator once again alienates himself from his surroundings, describing
himself as both ‘in someone else’s country’ and ‘outside of their country’ (124). His self-
inscribed status as ‘an alien … a sailor – landless and disconnected’ induces a feeling of
‘loneliness’ amongst the local people and their ‘alien ways’ (124). Nevertheless, he describes
being ‘sorry that [he] had never felt this particular loneliness before’ (124). The emotional
narrative state therefore goes back and forth within this figuration of Paris as “escape”,
without ever settling on a conclusion as to its status as a symbol of either freedom or
oppression. The key difference between this ambiguous metaphorical construction and the
more direct representation of “the Mecca” as a positive site of liberation is, arguably, the
absence of any overarching biblical or religious allusion that would risk casting it into the
realm of final judgment. Once again, I uphold that this stands as evidence of the split between
Coates’s separate liberation narrative and post-structuralist multiplicity narrative imperatives.

I would suggest that this narrative ambivalence in Between the World and Me – the
frequent perspective as objective, non-judgmental bystander – marks a significant point of
departure from Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’. McFadden summarizes this difference in prose style by characterizing Baldwin as ‘a preacher’ and Coates as ‘a poet’. This is in itself a rather vague comment, and I demonstrated above how Coates’s poetry may reflect more of the preacher’s voice than is initially apparent. Still, McFadden’s distinction is a useful exposition. Compare, for example, the closing paragraphs of Coates’s and Baldwin’s texts respectively. Baldwin’s warning was of the preacher telling of biblically framed ‘vengeance’ as a result of continued racial oppression (140-141). Coates’s similar warning is instead conveyed through the voice of the lyrical ‘I’ – reflecting on the permanence of the fear imbibed in the ‘beauty shops, churches, liquor stores, and crumbling housing’ of the ghettos. Through the pathetic fallacy, Coates even includes the natural environment in this scene; acknowledging the ‘rain coming down in sheets’ (151-152). Once again Coates’s narrator stands as witness to his environment, offering comment without interference or judgment.

The above comparison exemplifies narrative differences between Coates’s ambivalence and Baldwin’s directness. The final word of Baldwin’s argument is clear; continued racial oppression will mean the end of the human race. However, there is no fiery, apocalyptic conclusion to Coates’s arguments. His final word is impressionistic rather than didactic, offering no clear indication of positive or negative change. Moving away from his frequent borrowings from religious and spiritual metaphorical origins, here Coates conveys the aforementioned physical, material narrative perspective that he claims to be his focus. The absence of a polarising, religious component is crucial to this fluidity of meaning, allowing for a neutral narrative perspective and a text that defies easy binary interpretation. However, this ambiguity comes at a cost in terms of clarity and directness. As a result, it is difficult to isolate Coates’s theory of black liberation, his solution to the problem of American racism. It is therefore equally difficult to truly call his text a liberation narrative.

I asked earlier in this chapter how the claim to atheism in Between the World and Me affects the form, language and structure of the narrative, and its figuration of such major black autobiographical themes as liberation and oppression. It is now clear that the answer to this question is complex. It is evident, firstly, that the text does rely on the rhetorical, religious conventions of his literary ancestors more than may be initially apparent. He demonstrates his debt to such writers as Baldwin and Douglass in the language, syntax and metaphors with which he frames the black American male experience. As such, he invariably draws on the religious literary patterns that form the discursive foundations on which these writers discuss black oppression and freedom. Furthermore, Coates text is therefore at its most clear, direct
and accessible when he draws from this collective vocabulary of spiritualised liberation – as is evident in his concept of the Dream, his figuration of the Mecca and the sermonic mode with which he polarises his atheist self and the religious other. Coates also draws on the black autobiographical tradition of writing black male freedom at the expense of black women, as is evident in the narrative bias towards representing the black male experience in *Between the World and Me*. Moreover, his religious stereotyping, like that of his forefathers, proves instrumental in helping him achieve this male-biased narrative mode.

However, Coates subscribes to these conventions only in a partial and fragmented manner. At various points in his narrative, such as at its close and in conveying Paris as a safe racial haven, Coates attempts to defy this religious framing of racial oppression and present its consequences in a more abstract, ambiguous form. Such examples make apparent the crisis of identity that characterizes Coates’s entire text. The author’s paradoxical position in attempting to present a post-structuralist black liberation narrative causes *Between the World and Me* to operate through a duality of narrative imperatives. It is a text that at once requires the religious mode to clearly present vivid, binary metaphors of liberation and oppression, whilst also demanding that symbolism and meaning be illusive and ambiguous. Coates’s attempt to navigate between these two contradictory narrative modes proves to be both rewarding and confusing. On one hand, it allows him to write a black autobiography that comes out of the African American tradition without directly coming out of religion. On the other hand, it hinders his ability to present a clear, unambiguous manifesto of the route to liberation. This identity crisis makes *Between the World and Me* a fruitful subject of literary study within the African American autobiographical canon as a whole.
Conclusion

This thesis has explored three connected but distinctive African American autobiographical texts within and across their literary, cultural and historical contexts. The content of each of the three previous chapters shows that Douglass’s, Baldwin’s and Coates’s respective texts can be shown to share a common generic history and framework of conventions. Nonetheless, there are significant ways in which each of the texts demonstrates that the religious narrative in African American autobiography by men has evolved and adapted significantly over time. My focus throughout has been on the prominence of religion as a subject and formal device within each of these texts and contexts. In particular, I have been interested in the way that religious language and metaphor has been used to frame both “liberation” and “oppression” in African American autobiography, as well as the evolving nature of these conventions over time. In the introduction to this thesis, I raised three claims related to this analytical focus, and I uphold that the content of this study demonstrates at least some truth to each of these claims.

Douglass’s *Narrative* shows that control of the Christian liberation narrative was central to the literary and political aims of the author and his collective abolitionist cause. In many ways, Douglass expresses this aim overtly throughout the text, but especially in its appendix. Douglass sets up a Christian binary of “good” and “bad” people and behaviour, that hinges on the support of, or resistance to, American slavery. However, in addition to this overt method of argument, analysing the intricacies of Douglass’s prose reveals a strategic literary Christianity at a deeper level. The *Narrative* is saturated with language, devices, references and quotes intended to affect the reader with a sense of autobiographical authority and respectability. Many of these literary instances are either directly Biblical or classical; many of them are a combination of both. However, all of them work to convince the reader of the intellectual capabilities of Douglass the author, presented as he is as “ex-slave narrator”. Douglass often draws on the respected literary conventions of his time with a visible flourish. He quotes Shakespeare, adopts the cadences of romantic poetry, and adapts the ministerial sermonic mode to present radical arguments in the voice of the respectable conservative. However, this self-elevating strategic application of Christianized language also dissolves into Douglass’s prose at the more incidental level. His narrator communicates with seemingly casual, but evidently carefully pitched, religious expressions and references. Furthermore, Douglass combines the knowing, judgmental tone of irony with Christian morality to draw his
reader into shared criticism of his slaveholding enemies. Such techniques prove valuable tools
by which Douglass attracts the sympathy of his principally white, privileged audience for
unfamiliar and controversial ideas.

Douglass also employs the generic conventions of known and popular literary forms to
his own advantage. Critics have recognised that many of these influences on Douglass’s
writing are inherently Christian in their literary flavour; such as the spiritual autobiography,
conversion narrative and American jeremiad. Furthermore, Douglass combines conventional
Christian morality with the polarized characterization typical of sentimental fiction. Douglass
casts slaveholders as the unequivocal religious villains of his piece; either for their lack of, or
for their abuse of, respectable Christian moral codes. Slave characters, including Douglass
himself, represent the equivalent good Christian victims. Slave Christianity, in Douglass’s
Narrative, is as pure and heartfelt as slaveholding religion is manipulated and corrupt.
Polarized characterization always comes at the risk of character stereotyping and
underrepresentation, but Douglass’s female characters prove to suffer particular exploitation
in their polarized, Christianized role. Douglass’s version of Christian morality proves to
defend the bodies of slaves but not the bodies of women, which serve in the text as both
graphic, physical spectacle and as exemplification of nineteenth-century female expectations
of passive Christian subservience. Furthermore, Douglass’s mono-focalized narration proves
to be as effective at conveying a direct liberation narrative, as it is at limiting its narrative
fairness. The later chapters of the thesis show this silencing of the female voice to be a staple
ingredient of the male-authored black liberation narrative, with religious stereotypes and
discourses at the core of this approach. The moral, religious absolutism that underpins the
characterization, language choice and rhetoric of Douglass’s Narrative therefore proves to be
one of its central methods of establishing “liberation” and “oppression” as two halves of the
same binary. This text effectively demonstrates that the figurative potentiality of religion was
essential in the construction of black autobiographical vocabulary of liberation and oppression
at its historical slave narrative root.

Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’ shows a degree of debt to Douglass’s religious
narrative roots, but also demonstrates significant evolutions in the representative potentiality
of religion in black male autobiography. ‘Down at the Cross’ ostensibly takes up religion as
its primary subject in its autobiographical retelling of the narrator’s experiences with the
Christian Church and the Nation of Islam movement. However, the text demonstrates a
secular voice that differs markedly from Douglass, despite the continued presence of many
literary features of the traditional, religious, black oratorical mode. Baldwin’s narrator represents the Christian Church and its related ideology as sites of hypocrisy and tyranny. Moreover, Baldwin protests the Christian demand that the individual give up his or her right to independent, critical thought and agency. This proves to be the common link between the narrator’s dismissal of the Church and of the Nation of Islam; that of their shared demand for unwavering faith in the religious institution. Significantly, this means that Baldwin’s religious thematic situates religion as “oppression”, with “liberation” finding its place in the secular alternative. We might say that Baldwin therefore replaces the traditional religious liberation narrative with a religious oppression narrative. This narrative stance is evidently a long way from Douglass’s intense literary effort to present a respectable, Christian narrative self. However, in other ways Baldwin’s criticisms of religious hypocrisy in general can be seen to echo Douglass’s critique of the religious hypocrisy of slavery in particular. Furthermore, Baldwin can be seen to reinforce many of Douglass’s religious female stereotypes to the same goal of suppressing the female presence in his text. Perhaps most significantly, Baldwin punctuates his secular critique of the religious liberation narrative with a conclusion saturated with apocalyptic, religious rhetoric to heighten its clarity and impact. This demonstrates the semantic tension in the African American religious oppression narrative; the way it relies on the mores of the religious liberation narrative in its expression.

Nonetheless, wider reading reveals that the religious oppression narrative was not an anomalous quirk of Baldwin’s prose, but drew on a developing body of early twentieth-century black autobiographical work. Langston Hughes, Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston all demonstrate the collective development of the Touchstone narrative form. This relies on critiquing the perceived ineffectiveness of, and dissatisfaction produced by, the Christian conversion experience. A common theme across all of these texts is the way in which they portray Christianity as a site of oppression that forces them into submission and pretence. Furthermore, all three writers share similarities in their narrative exploration of this idea, such as their shrouding of controversial but pertinent criticisms in the naïve wisdom of a youthful autobiographical voice. These texts therefore demonstrate the rise of the twentieth-century secular voice in black American autobiography. However, also crucial is the idea of multiplicity and opposition within the religious voice in black autobiography. The legacy and rhetoric of Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s exemplifies that the traditional, Christian liberation narrative was still a force to be reckoned with at this time. Equally, the autobiography of Malcom X provides evidence that Islam, much like secularism, was
becoming increasingly accepted and taken up as an alternative religious liberation narrative. The religious oppression narrative in Baldwin’s ‘Down at the Cross’ can therefore be seen to pay tribute to a collective coming together of stimulating, competing forces in its conception. It is evident that the charged literary environments of the 1920-1930s Harlem Renaissance and 1950-1960s Civil Rights Movement were the key sites of this fruition.

Douglass, Baldwin and the historical context of religion in male African American autobiography are therefore useful starting points in approaching Coates’s 2015 *Between the World and Me* in its contemporary context. Most criticism of the text to date has tended to focus on Coates’s literary debts to Baldwin, and the form and effect of his alleged atheist narrative drives. However, the stylistic properties of *Between the World and Me* quickly reveal that while Coates may claim not to come out of religion, his prose quite evidently does. Ironically, Coates is at his most direct, and his prose most sermonic, in his explicit rejections of the value of faith and religion. His religious vocabulary operates in a space between the shared influences of Douglass and Baldwin. Like both of these writers, Coates discusses “liberation” as both physical and symbolic escape from an oppressive setting. However, for Coates, “escape” never operates quite as unequivocally as a site of “liberation” as it does in Douglass, nor does it quite represent the absolute “oppression” found in Baldwin. Importantly, though, Coates’s addition of a religious metaphorical component to his figuration of “escape”, as he does with “the Mecca”, proves to be an essential literary device in the rare instances when he does settle on a final judgment – in this case as a site of “liberation”.

Coates references and alludes to Baldwin in his discussion of the Dream, especially its metaphorical refiguration of American racism as an act of belief. Here, his imagery could not be further from Douglass’s steadfast narrative commitment to the value of the American Dream as a site of liberation. However, at other times Coates’s literary debt to Douglass’s Christianized narrative mores is explicit. Prince Jones is cast as Douglass’s classic sentimental victim, tragically lost to the villainy of the Dreamers. Furthermore, Coates’s heavily male narrative focus risks objectifying and silencing the text’s female dimension as fully in 2015 as Douglass does in his 1845 *Narrative*. Coates’s wife is sorely underrepresented; and while Dr. Mabel Jones can be seen as a somewhat more fully realised character, she still suffers under a dated, stereotypical characterization of female, religious propriety. The role of women in the text therefore shows the religious imperative source of Coates’s black male autobiographical tradition perhaps more than anything else.
In addition to these influences, *Between the World and Me* is demonstrably affected by post-structuralist thought regarding the multiplicity of signification and indefinite autobiographical presence. This is crucial in discussing the increased ambiguity and narrative ambivalence present in Coates’s text when compared with both Douglass and Baldwin. Coates’s narrator is inconsistent and non-committal on a number of topics, including the respective values of religion and non-belief in achieving black liberation. At times, he voices his humanist, material focus with superiority and the religious liberation narrative with scorn. Other times, he voices envy of the religious faith of other characters and dissatisfaction with his own atheism. This ambivalence also applies to the narrator’s discussion of Paris; it is never fully decided whether this setting succeeds or fails to live up to its promise as a site of racial liberation. Furthermore, such ambivalent prose also demonstrates Coates’s tendency to increasingly voice his narrator as passive witness, offering impressionistic image fragments of scenes. These images defy straightforward interpretation, and remove the text from religious binaries and narrative imperatives that would suggest final signification and absolute judgment. This combination of factors underlines the crisis of identity at work in Coates’s *Between the World and Me*. Coates’s narrative is fragmented and disjointed by its attempts to: firstly, operate from an atheist liberation vocabulary; secondly, draw on the themes and mores of black, literary ancestors that originally found their voice in a religious context; thirdly, present a detached, neutral narrative stance and avoid semantic absolutes, while operating under the religious absolutes demanded within the frameworks of liberation and oppression narratives.

I would suggest that these competing and contradictory narrative drives, as well as its status as a rare example of a full-length contemporary black autobiography, make *Between the World and Me* an interesting text in the African American autobiographical canon. While its crisis of identity may make it difficult to place generically, this might be seen as one of the more rewarding aspects of attempting to do so. While there are no doubt still plentiful new ways to read Douglass and Baldwin, I would suggest that Coates’s text may be a more interesting starting point for future research. Future criticism would do well to analyse other influences, outside of the religious context, on Coates’s expression of autobiographical identity. I mentioned earlier, for example, the alleged influence of hip-hop lyricism on Coates’ writing. There has been a great deal of recent scholarship on the relationship between hip-hop and black cultural-literary identity; examples include Adam Krims’s 2000 book *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, Loren Kajikawa’s 2015 book *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*.
and Baruti Kopano’s 2002 article ‘Rap music as an extension of the Black rhetorical
tradition’. It would be interesting to see this work overlap into Coates’s autobiographical
domain.

While I have touched upon the subject at points of overlap with my religious focus, the
persistent patriarchal tendencies of black male literature merit further exploration in their own
right. Future research may usefully look at other ways in which black male autobiographical
writing, outside of just the slave narratives, has historically exploited narrative devices to
exclude women from its pages and realm of discussion. Additionally, research could focus on
establishing a more developed history of black female autobiographical conventions,
including such prominent representatives of the genre as Jacobs and Hurston, to counter the
dominance of the male focus of the genre.

Lastly, this thesis obliquely raises the proposition that the rise of post-structuralist
autobiographical theory may relate to the evolution of the secular liberation voice in black
autobiography. There has been some work done to try and address the idea of atheism as the
post-structuralist replacement for religion in voicing black liberation and oppression.
However, this subject is still in its infancy and could form an interesting body of work if
given the appropriate level of critical attention.
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