



YALE INSTITUTE OF SACRED MUSIC

Hard Gospel: Blackness, Belief, Aesthetics

*Hosted by The Interdisciplinary Program
in Music and Black Church*

April 22, 2026
Yale Divinity School

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9:00 AM Creative Liturgy: "If It Had Not Been for the Lord" Marquand Chapel

All symposium panels will be held in YDS's Great Hall

10:15 AM Welcome & Opening Remarks Prof. Braxton D. Shelley
George Washington Williams Professor of Music,
of Sacred Music, and of Divinity
Faculty Director,
Interdisciplinary Program in Music and the Black Church

10:30 AM Panel I Prof. Clifton Granby, Chair
Associate Professor of Ethics,
Philosophy and Africana Studies

Dr. Joshua L. Lazard, Boston University

"When Sunday Comes: Fugitivity and the Sounds of Blackness"

Dr. Jonathan Howard, Yale University

"The Lower Room"

Dr. Adrián Emmanuel Hernández-Acosta, Yale University

"So Beautiful": On the Complex Aesthetic of Billy Preston's Simple Song"

12:00 PM Lunch

1:00 PM Panel II Prof. Jamil Drake, Chair
Assistant Professor of African American Religious History

Dr. Jessica Swaston Baker, University of Chicago

"Behave Yourself": Hearing the Labor of Black Feminine Aspiration
in Neo Soul and Gospel Music

Dr. Maurice Wallace, Rutgers University

"As the Spirit Moves Le'Andria"

Dr. Lisa Allen, Methodist Theological Seminary

"Something's Got a Hold of Me:
Gospel Music as Afrofuturist Spiritual Technology"

2:30 PM Break

3:30 PM ISM Colloquium Marquand Chapel



Abstracts

“When Sunday Comes: Fugitivity and the Sounds of Blackness”

Dr. Joshua L. Lazard

What makes a sound Black? Does blackness have a sound? This talk considers the relationship between the African American preaching tradition and music, particularly the sonic production of the Hammond organ. The ritualized sounds of blackness heard in African American churches articulate a ‘speech-sound’ event that interrupts, disrupts, and irrupts. Named as logosonic exhortation, this is a fugitive sound heard in African American churches on any given Sunday.

“The Lower Room”

Dr. Jonathan Howard

This paper explores how the gospel imagination intervenes in a broad cultural and religious idealization of “up” and corresponding neglect and disparagement of “down.” Using Cory Henry’s “Go Down,” from the 2024 album, *Church*, it theorizes an important complement to the vaunted “upper room” of Christian theology, that it proposes we might alternatively call the lower room. The paper considers the “lower room” as it might be identified in the space of the underground and the hold of the slave ship in Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*, and Olaudah Equiano’s eighteenth-century slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1789)*, respectively. Ultimately, the paper reconceives the maligned excesses of the black gospel tradition as the fruition of a tradition shaped by the activity of the spirit in the lower as well as the upper room.

“So Beautiful”: On the Complex Aesthetic of Billy Preston’s Simple Song

Dr. Adrián Emmanuel Hernández-Acosta

This paper focuses on the nearly two-minute vamp at the end of Billy Preston’s 1974 “You Are So Beautiful.” It argues that the vamp, though often dropped from the many covers that have made the composition a standard in the American repertoire, complexifies the aesthetic of what is otherwise considered a simple song. Through a reading of two words from the vamp’s refrain—“so beautiful”—this paper demonstrates how the vamp deconstructs the Kantian distinction between the beautiful and the sublime as discrete aesthetic categories differentiated by their respective delimitations of imagination. While the beautiful delimits imagination and the sublime de-limits it, the vamp deconstructs the limit itself. By attending to the vamp’s vocal styling, harmonic structure, and orchestration, this paper situates its deconstruction of aesthetic categories in the aural mediation of a gospel imagination. Finally, reflecting on Preston’s own queer relation to (the) gospel, this paper asks how the vamp may help us better hear the complex aesthetics of those whose simple songs are neither in nor out but at the limit.

“Behave Yourself”: Hearing the Labor of Black Feminine Aspiration in Neo Soul and Gospel Music

Dr. Jessica Swaston Baker

This paper reads a live performance in which gospel legend Karen Clark Sheard and her teenage daughter Kierra cover Jill Scott’s neo soul classic “He Loves Me (Lyzel in E Flat)” as a staged transmission of Black feminine aspiration across generations. Drawing on Zora Neale Hurston’s distinction between spirituals and neo-spirituals, I argue that the tension between excess and restraint is constitutive of Black music, especially gospel music, and neo soul offers a contemporary iteration of that same tension. Centering Black feminized labor as the technology through which this tension is produced, transmitted, and converted into cultural and economic value, this paper offers another way of hearing what is at stake in gospel’s sonic excess.

As the Spirit Moves Le’Andria

Dr. Maurice Wallace

This talk’s title is an improvisation on a 1958 music criticism by Ralph Ellison titled “As the Spirit Moves Mahalia.” To be clear, I have little interest in comparing Le’Andria Johnson to Jackson superficially (i.e., as already or poised to be equal to Jackson in art, impact, or celebrity). Rather, this talk explores Johnson’s embodied musicality, i.e., the kinetic freedoms of gesture and perambulation that not only help materialize the gospel sound in the singer’s vocalic body but, crucially, enact a dramatic refusal of musical respectability, as well.

Something’s Got a Hold of Me: Gospel Music as Afrofuturist Spiritual Technology

Dr. Lisa Allen

In this paper, Dr. Lisa Allen-McLaurin examines the origins, characteristics, and practices of gospel music, investigating how the genre has functioned historically and contemporarily as Afrofuturist spiritual technology. Employing hermeneutics of Womanist and process theologies, she explores how Afrofuturist tenets of imagination, hope, and expectation for transformative change permeate gospel music as a genre and imbue it with power beyond the performative.





Adrián Emmanuel Hernández Acosta is Assistant Professor of Religion and Literature at Yale Divinity School and the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. Professor Hernández Acosta specializes in the arts of the Caribbean Americas as sites of critical connection between religious traditions, academic disciplines, and languages both vernacular and theoretical. His current book manuscript focalizes two twentieth-century Cuban writers—José Lezama Lima and Virgilio Piñera—who fought in verse, prose, and body over the role of art in mourning. It frames their feud as a uniquely instructive scene for ongoing debates about aesthetic responses to suffering in politically fraught times. With writing published or forthcoming in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, and *GLQ* as well as graduate courses such as “Theory in Mourning,” “Epic Laments,” and “Mysticisms in Black Studies,” Professor Hernández Acosta is committed in research and teaching to tarrying with the dead and dying in a world seemingly determined to let the lives of so many fall away.



The Reverend Dr. Lisa Allen is Associate Dean and Professor of Worship, Music, and Spirituality at Methodist Theological School in Ohio (MTSO). She is an ordained elder and the Coordinator of Practical Ministries for the Sixth Episcopal District of the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church. She graduated from Millsaps College and the University of Southern Mississippi with Bachelor’s, Master’s, and Ph.D. degrees in piano and music education. She also holds the Master of Divinity degree from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University.

Dr. Allen-McLaurin’s teaching interests include spirituality and theology in worship and music, and gender issues in the Church. She has authored several books, including her most recent book, *Over My Head: The Power of Ancestral Music to Future the Black Church* (Cascade Books, 2025), *The OneWord Worship Model: A New Paradigm for Church Worship Planning* (Cascade Books, 2023), and her 2021 monograph, *A Womanist Theology of Worship: Liturgy, Justice, and Communal Righteousness* (Orbis Books). Dr. Allen-McLaurin has been featured as an ethnomusicologist and practical theologian in video and online journal documentaries including the 2020 People’s Voice Webby Award-winning documentary, *A King’s Place: Reclaiming the Black Church’s Civil*

Rights Past and the 2015 Emmy-award winning documentary, *Reflect, Reclaim, Rejoice: Preserving the Gift of Black Sacred Music*. She is a noted composer and arranger and, in 2019 debuted her Advent cantata, *Christmas is Waiting to Be Born: An Advent Cantata Inspired by the Works of Howard Thurman* at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. While on sabbatical in 2023, Dr. Allen-McLaurin served a six-month term as music director and scholar-in-residence at the American Church in Paris, France. In addition to her work at MTSO and the CME Church, Dr. Allen-McLaurin serves on the editorial board of *The Methodist Review Journal* and holds memberships in the American Academy of Religion and the Society for the Study of Black Religion. She has served as a mentor with the RISE Together National Mentorship Network and is a 2018 inductee into the Morehouse College Board of Preachers.

Dr. Allen-McLaurin is married to Thomas McLaurin and their blended family includes five children and two grandchildren.



Dr. Jessica Swanston Baker is an ethnomusicologist and associate professor of music at the University of Chicago whose work explores Caribbean popular music, listening, and postcolonial time. Her writing has appeared in *Ethnomusicology*, *Representations*, and other journals and edited volumes. Her first book, the award-winning *Island Time: Speed and the Archipelago from St. Kitts and Nevis* (University of Chicago Press, 2024), tells the story of wylers, an up-tempo popular music from St. Kitts and Nevis, and shows how sound and speed shape modern Caribbean life.



Dr. Jonathan Howard is an Assistant Professor of Black Studies and English at Yale University. His research and teaching broadly interrogate western ideas about race and nature while also exploring black expressive culture as an alternative site of ecological thought and practice. His first book, *Inhabitants of the Deep: The Blueness of Blackness*, undertakes a black ecocritical study of the “deep” as the diffuse subtext of African American literature. It argues that blackness dawns in Middle Passage as an ongoing inhabitation of the deep, which is most fully apprehended not as social death but ecological life.



Dr. Joshua Lawrence Lazard is a scholar of African American religion. After earning a Bachelor of Arts in Accounting at Fisk University, he completed a Master of Divinity and Master of Arts in Church Music at the Interdenominational Theological Center presenting a thesis on the relationship between Black preaching and music. As an ordained Baptist minister, Joshua currently serves as the associate pastor of Church of the Covenant in downtown Boston. He attained his Ph.D. at Boston University, School of Theology, with his primary area of research focused on the aesthetics of the African American preaching tradition. He recently defended his dissertation entitled, “The Sanctified Imagination: The Afterlife of Sermons in the African American Preaching Tradition.” His critical interests pay attention to the sounds of religious blackness as they bear on fugitivity, theories of imagination, pragmatism, and Black critical theory. This fall, Joshua will join the faculty of Washington and Lee University as an Assistant Professor of Africana Studies and Religion.



Dr. Maurice Wallace is professor and associate chair of English at Rutgers University-New Brunswick. The author of *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (which earned him an MLA William Scarborough Prize) and *King's Vibrato: Blackness, Modernism and the Sonic Life of Martin Luther King Jr.*, both published by Duke Univ. Press, he is also co-editor with Shawn Michelle Smith of *Pictures and Progress: Early Photography and the Making of African American Identity*. Wallace teaches nineteenth- and twenty-century African American literature, nineteenth-century American literature, and Black cultural studies. At Rutgers, he co-directed the 2023-2024 Center for Cultural Analysis (CCA) Faculty Seminar, "Sound Studies and Voice" (with Andrew Parker in Comparative Literature) and, since 2020 co-convenor (with Nathan Jérémie-Brink of New Brunswick Theological Seminary) of the CCA Gospel Materialities Working Group. Currently, he is at work on two monographs: a book tentatively titled *Objects and Uplift: Frederick Douglass, New Materialism, and the Black Hermeneutics of Things* and a meditation on race, ecology, and tree life in the US titled *Black Trees*.

Yale Institute of Sacred Music Interdisciplinary Program in Music and the Black Church

Launched in 2021, ISM's Interdisciplinary Program in Music and the Black Church brings sustained scholarly attention to the music of the Black Church and its wide-ranging influence across American and global musical cultures. It convenes scholars, students, and practitioners for research, performance, and public conversation, positioning Black sacred music as a central site of intellectual and artistic inquiry at Yale. Directed by the Rev. Dr. Braxton Shelley, the George Washington Williams Professor of Music, Sacred Music, and Divinity at Yale, the program has also become a point of national convening. It has hosted leading gospel artists – including Kirk Franklin, Kurt Carr, Donald Lawrence, Richard Smallwood, The Clark Sisters, and Cory Henry – as well as premier choir directors and leading practitioners from across the country. The program has also organized conferences and symposia anchored by scholarly presentations: Ambre Dromgoole, Ashon Crawley, Charrise Barron, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Cornel West, Henry Washington, James Abbington, Louise Toppin, Marla Frederick, among others. Through concerts, lectures, and student engagement, the program creates sustained exchange between the academy and the living traditions of Black gospel music.

