

Crawley, Ashon. 2020. *The Lonely Letters*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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What does it mean to take “entanglement” as a first principle when writing about Black life and Black joy? What happens when “entanglement” is conceived as more than just a metaphor for a certain mode of existing and relating, just a means to bridge disciplinary traditions, or just a keyword for an ethics of care?

In *The Lonely Letters*, religion and black studies scholar Ashon Crawley seeks to answer these questions. In this genre-resistant text, Crawley takes up entanglement persistently and is himself taken up by it – “carried,” to borrow a word that figures prominently in his writing. *The Lonely Letters* is an epistolary work in which Crawley weaves together meditations on romance and Blackpentecostal worship, quantum physics, aesthetic practice, theories of marronage and vocality, minimalist composition, and digressions on innumerable other topics. Crawley’s writing has long sought to think together Blackqueer studies and Blackpentecostal/gospel studies, and it is through *The Lonely Letters*’ performance of entangled thought, enabled by Crawley’s eclectic archive and writing practice, that this conjunction feels not only unforced but revelatory of something vital and essential. Indeed, Crawley discovers in the expressive practices of Blackpentecostalism the means to imagine a world built on Black joy and care. Even better, he explores the transposition of the aesthetic principles derived from traditionally Blackpentecostal spaces into other domains and models a practice based on these principles in his own writing. Though Crawley engages with examples from a diversity of expressive modalities, including dance, literature, visual art, and film, music scholars will be especially keen to find robust insights in sound studies as well as a model for writing about musical practices in the key of radical antiracism.

The structure of the *Lonely Letters* is both idiosyncratic and performative. The book is divided into five main chapters, plus an introduction; each chapter is then divided into as many as fourteen letters. In lieu of individual titles, each letter is labelled with the first initial of the chapter plus the number indicating sequential position (for example, the third letter in the chapter “noise³” is labelled “n-3”). All of the letters except the introduction¹ are addressed to an interlocutor named “Moth,” variously figured as (ex-)lover, confidant, colleague, antagonist, who Crawley describes as a composite of real people he has known. The letters are signed

“A.,” which represents a dramatized or idealized version of Crawley. All of the letters in the book follow this format, meaning that we never get to read Moth’s response or original provocations, although A. often seems to be directly responding to points Moth has made. The absence of Moth’s letters compels the reader to fill in the gaps, using clues in A.’s writing to try to reproduce the full conversation. The reader is thereby directly implicated – indeed, entangled – in the meaning-making process of the book. Crawley also cross-references and repeats himself constantly, variously returning to ideas, authors, and terminology, announcing early in the introduction, “I am fundamentally a Blackpentecostal, I believe in repetition as a means for discovering something that is below and beneath and behind what appear to be flat surfaces” (5). Yet, these thematic returns never become tiresome; instead they act as intensifying epistrophes, refrains within which meaning condenses. A major consequence of all these formal devices is that one cannot easily choose to read a few letters at random; *The Lonely Letters* is meant to be read in its entirety.

The web of entanglements extends beyond *The Lonely Letters*: as Crawley explains in the book’s opening chapter, “and³,” *The Lonely Letters* intricately relates to *Blackpentecostal Breath*, Crawley’s 2016 monograph investigating Blackpentecostal practices through the disciplinary lens of performance studies. *The Lonely Letters* and *Blackpentecostal Breath* share chapter titles (“breath,” “shouting,” “noise,” “tongues,” and “nothing”)² and a peculiar theoretical lexicon, including provocative keywords like “centrifugivity,” “choreosonics,” and “atheology” that help to elucidate the inventiveness of Blackpentecostal practices.³ Above all, both books highlight the categorical irreducibility and moving excess of Blackpentecostalism in order to demonstrate the antiracist verve of its expressive forms. Yet, while these books are putatively “about” the same things and clearly draw from the same theoretical well, they achieve their textual effects through distinct means. Thus, *The Lonely Letters* is by no means simply a “sequel” to *Blackpentecostal Breath*; instead, it enacts a form of literary companionship, a nonlinear yet generative relationship that emerges from reading both texts.⁴

Crawley engages with a motley array of sources, which allows him to craft an intricate network of sympathies between vastly disparate expressions of Blackpentecostalism. “Blackpentecostalism” is Crawley’s term for expressive practices, forms of sociality and relation, and affective states emanating from, but not reducible to, African American Pentecostal worship. Scholars of African American worship will be unsurprised to find shouting, speaking in tongues, Hammond B3 organ accompaniment, and the aesthetics of gospel singing among the practices considered. Crucially,

however, Crawley's use of Blackpentecostalism exceeds any conventional or denominational definition of African American Pentecostalism: discussing affinities between minimalist composer Steve Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* and a YouTube video of worship singing at a Black Baptist church, Crawley addresses the capaciousness of his Blackpentecostal designation:

I'm not trying to make everything Blackpentecostal either. I guess I'm just noticing the relations between, the relays, the resonance that Blackpentecostal force has with all kinds of ideas and ways of life and performances. And by resonance, I mean the way Blackpentecostalism is evoked or suggested in decidedly non-Blackpentecostal spaces and places and practices. (44)

Thus, beyond examples from familiar Black worship spaces, Crawley discovers Blackpentecostal expressions in a variety of media, from the films *Moonlight* (2016) and *La Petite Vendeuse de Soleil* (1999) to an Instagram video of the #bodegastrike, in which many Muslim shopkeepers in New York City engage in public worship. Additionally, quasi-autobiographical accounts from Crawley/A.'s romantic life and aesthetic practices, written from a position of searching loneliness, offer a laboratory for experiments in Blackpentecostal technique.

In large part, Crawley's investigations and experiments are brought together via the through-line of "Black joy" (148). According to Crawley, to write about and live "joy" signals a willingness and openness to becoming entangled, to being affected. This openness, he argues, is characteristic of Blackpentecostal expression. This notion of "joy" is a critique of the liberal subject, the overrepresented subjective formation which Black feminist theorist Sylvia Wynter has famously called "Man."⁵ Man, the calculating subject, desires to possess happiness, whereas Crawley describes being "caught up" in joy, thereby decentering his own agency and distributing responsibility throughout a network of social entanglements.⁶ Joy, throughout *The Lonely Letters*, is metonymic for a general "refusal of renunciation," or an orientation towards social entanglement as the basis for individual being. Crawley makes clear the relationship between writing Black joy and the project of antiracism: to embrace the vulnerability required to lose oneself in the frenzy of Blackpentecostal worship, or the tentativeness of Blackqueer life, is to attune oneself to the ways in which oppressed groups have had to base their existence on mutual care and interdependence. To experience, write about, and generate joy is to agitate against the "narratives that are told about the possibility of being human" that underpin "sexism, patriarchy, misogyny, queer antagonism, empire, colonization, and

antiblack racism” (89, 4). These narratives about the individual subject’s putative independence and autonomy are really narratives about whiteness and power; in *The Lonely Letters*, Crawley seeks to impart alternative narratives.

For Crawley, one powerful source of joy is the sound and movement – the “choreosonicity” – of Blackpentecostal worship. The movement of Blackpentecostal joy is introduced early in the first chapter of the book, “breath³”. In letter “B-3”,⁷ Crawley/A. expresses his frustration with western mystical traditions, exemplified by Medieval theologian Meister Eckhart, that preach a renunciation of the social: “I’ve got no problem with renunciation, retreat, or movement” he explains, “it’s just the direction of such that worries me” (23). In subsequent letters, Crawley outlines speculative genealogical connections between mystical renunciation and forms of contemporary aversion: for instance, fat and femme-shaming on the queer hookup app Grindr. The broader argument, which aligns with insights from disability studies, is that certain mystical forms of renunciation (of the social, of the body) presume the overrepresentation of normative conceptions of the human as able-bodied and self-sufficient (27). Alternatively, Blackpentecostal “breath” (also discussed as “spirit” or “pneuma” in Pentecostal theology) constitutes a practiced openness to otherness, an otherness which fills the individual with a constitutive, animating force—one *is* only because of this otherness. To be filled with breath, this otherness, is to be “made instrument,” writes Crawley: this concept expands daringly as a way to think Black life as an orientation towards being “made instrument.” This discussion of being “made instrument” anticipates the critique of the distinction between “person” and “thing” developed in later chapters and constitutes an important through line in the book. Crawley also raises friendship as a key theme in this opening chapter, counterposing friendship to marriage as an “anti-institutional,” queer mode of relating that challenges the “western logics of the right way to be human” (29-30). Crawley augments Foucault’s foundational thinking on queer friendship, pushing toward an account of Black sociality grounded not in the legitimizing force of institutions but in both “susceptibility” and “vulnerability” – terms that Crawley considers within the frameworks of both Blackpentecostal expression and Blackqueer sociality, as well as within the context of deeply personal vignettes throughout the chapter.

In the second chapter, “shouting³,” readers are introduced to Crawley/A.’s artistic practice, a sort of action painting inspired by Blackpentecostal aesthetics. Crawley describes his own mystical/aesthetic practice, an attempt to “see what praise looks like after the flesh—the material force of such creation—left the building, after flesh escaped” (60). In a series of let-

ters, Crawley describes listening and moving (clapping, shouting, playing the tambourine) to gospel praise breaks while covered in paint, which leaves kinetic streaks and smudges of paint on large canvasses on the floor. The results of these sound-movement-paint experiments are reprinted in vivid color throughout this chapter and occasionally later in the book. Through these aesthetic experiments, we are (re-)introduced to a concept from *Blackpentecostal Breath*, the “choreosonicity” of Blackpentecostal aesthetics.⁸ Choreosonicity gestures towards the irreducibility of Blackpentecostal expression to the exclusive domains of sound or movement, and the necessity of engaging with these expressions across modalities (perhaps even conceiving them as deconstructive of modality).

Throughout this chapter, we are confronted with another crucial theme: the injurious potential of Blackpentecostal spaces, especially to those (like A.) attempting to live Blackqueer lives. “How can a place that feels good also be a place that hurts our feelings?” Crawley/A. asks pointedly. In this chapter, the threat of homophobic and misogynoir injury is the nagging underbelly of discussions of mysticism and shouting. As potent as their practices are for enacting new forms of sociality, these church spaces can also harbor intolerance and pain, and Crawley reflects often on this tension. The chapter’s final letter ultimately culminates in an affectively charged scene in which ecstatic shouting in church leads to a homoerotic encounter between Crawley/A. and a character referred to as D; the church, a site of potential homophobic injury, also generates the conditions for rupturing that which gives rise to injury.

In the third chapter, noise signifies those phenomena unrecognized or unperceived by dominant western epistemes, for example: marronage as a theory of the social, modes of black resistance in Du Bois’ account of Black Reconstruction, forms of patriarchal harm, and memories and experiences of Blackqueer being. A. begins by turning to quantum physics to verify the idea that “there are things that happen in the world, in the universe, that are not easily perceptible to human flesh” (87). These phenomena can be “felt” but they are hard to quantify, measure, and prove—they are the “noise” in the systems of western reason, and therefore Man concerns himself with the “dispensing of noise” (94). Crawley’s recourse to quantum and astrophysics throughout the book, especially regarding the core concept of “entanglement,” might wrongly be interpreted as opportunistic and turn off some readers. These readers are right to be wary of authors who suddenly and conveniently embrace naïve scientific realism in their otherwise anti-essentialist humanities texts when scientific findings confirm the interpretation they are trying to argue. That, however, is not what Crawley is doing. He never loses sight of the situatedness of knowledge

within specific practices of knowledge-making. Indeed, that is the major lesson of his attention to Blackpentecostal expressive practices: that doing something (worshipping, singing) one way as opposed to another yields an entirely different relation to and knowledge about others and the world.

Throughout the chapter, Crawley draws on examples from Black art in which that which cannot be accounted for according to racist juridical, legal, scopical, and other epistemological regimes is essential: *Moonlight's* attention to the sensuousness of Blackqueer life, the subtlety of Blackqueerness in James Baldwin's novel *Just Above My Head*, unrecognized forms of renunciation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and the work of artist Adrian Piper. The chapter closes with a powerful intervention into Black Radical thought: contrary to analyses of racism which assume the category of "things" as contrary to the category of personhood (i.e. the "slavery as social death" interpretation), Crawley suggests that the logic of categorical distinction between "person" and "thing" is itself a precondition for racial violence. Instead, he argues that Blackqueer and Blackpentecostal orientations to the world acknowledge and celebrate a shared "thingliness," thereby producing an "otherwise" logic that yields an "alternative to the social ordering" (144).⁹

In the fourth chapter, "tongues³," voice is theorized with robust variety; we encounter voice as a sensuous trace of the body, as a synonym for language and meaning, as a materialization of the Blackpentecostal sacred, and, most abstractly, as a metaphor for aporia: the fundamental gap in a system of meaning. A chorus of voices echo throughout this chapter: artist Samuel Levi Jones, Audre Lorde, jazz pianist Art Tatum, Aretha Franklin, Sister Rosetta Tharpe, and several female gospel singers A., and surprisingly, George W. Bush. Voices are constrained by listeners' expectations (as in the case of African American Vernacular English), they subvert the intentions of words by indicating the otherness of the bodies whose traces they bear, they convey a sense of movement through harmonic modulation, and they scuttle the maintenance of rigid sacred and secular boundaries (as in the case of Franklin – or they reveal untimely recalcitrance in the case of Tharpe). In the final section, Crawley discusses what he calls female gospel singers' vocal "wetness," sonic characteristics that evidence their "having been submerged but having, also and most importantly, survived any attempt at drowning" (206). The gospel voice, in other words, demands a total reframing of one's linguistic expectations in order to resituate the putatively "meta" or "paralinguistic" as central to the story.

The final chapter, "nothing³," takes up its titular theme in at least two key ways. First, Crawley is interested in the constitutive "nothing" between things, that is, temporal and extensional space, arrhythmias and musical

transitions. Second is the accusation from critics of Blackpentecostalism (often other worshippers) that ecstatic, noisy worship is not necessary to praise God, that “it doesn’t take all that,” that it is, effectively, nothing (227). If it is possible to worship without the sweat and noise of speaking in tongues, shouting, and other Blackpentecostal expressions, if these practices functionally add nothing to more constrained forms of worship, then why engage in them at all? Crawley discusses churchgoers “sanctimonious” and often harmful rejection of the Blackpentecostal expressions he discusses throughout the book; this sanctimony and rejection from the churches that raised him is the source of his loneliness, he explains. To the dismissal of Blackpentecostalism as “nothing,” however, Crawley responds unexpectedly by embracing that very designation and by shifting the question out of the register of theology and doctrine. Instead of asking whether one or another form of worship is more “correct,” Crawley refocuses our attention onto what forms of worship and sacred expression do. He answers that precisely by doing “nothing,” Blackpentecostal aesthetics generate an entangled and improvised sociality or, following Crawley’s reading of Christina Sharpe (2016), an orientation towards “care” (237).

Crawley’s opening example of a “nothing” that generates care and sociality is the “nothing music”¹⁰ performed on the Hammond B-3 organ by Dolores, the romantic partner of A’s aunt. Crawley’s vivid depiction of Dolores accompanying A’s aunt’s singing in church illustrates the cooperative enactment and improvisation of a Blackqueer relationship in sound and gesture – a relationship without juridical or doctrinal authority that is nonetheless generated through openness and performance. Crawley’s “nothing music” can be framed as a compelling alternative to the “work concept” familiar to musicologists; instead of the ontological stability through time and space posited by the work concept, the being of “nothing music” is primarily improvisational potential. Crawley writes, “This is *nothing*. Nothing, not the absence but the overwhelming presence of some otherwise possibility, in this moment--this here and now moment” (241). With “nothing music” there may be some minimal musical material or stylistic gestures with which performance begins, but Blackpentecostal aesthetics are about the repetitions, improvisations, and imaginings occasioned in performance. Dolores’ organ playing, as well as performances by Crawley’s former gospel group, the New Dawns, enact an absence of center through these quintessentially Blackpentecostal movements. This absence of center takes on a certain melancholy by the end of the chapter, as we return to the familiar theme of loneliness. Despite the fact that Crawley/A has learned the movements and techniques of Blackpentecostal performance from the churches of his youth, it rings bittersweet that he

closes the final letter not by returning to these spaces, which now threaten homophobic injury, but by looking for Blackpentecostalism elsewhere, in the choreosonic public worship of Muslim shopkeepers.

Crawley's closing turn towards public forms of Blackpentecostal expression outside of traditional church spaces beckons the reader to seek out similar instantiations of Blackpentecostalism in this present moment of spontaneous social action. In the wake of highly visible instances of antiblack violence throughout the United States, we are witnessing and, for many of us, participating in the improvisation of new forms of protest and social relations: the Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone in Seattle and Occupy City Hall are just two prominent examples of movements intentionally built on the principle of Black joy. Many scholars have remarked upon the revolutionary impulse in a lot of Black music; what Crawley models in *The Lonely Letters* is the movement from critique and analysis to praxis in the literary mode and beyond. It is difficult to convey precisely what it is like to read this book; Crawley's incantatory repetitions and vertiginous shifts of topic and tone perform the entangled Blackpentecostal aesthetics he strives to describe, making it quite unlike other academic texts. In his rendering, Blackpentecostal expressive practices – specific approaches to musical performance, poetry, painting, dance, everyday speech, etc. – enable those who become entangled to experience the world in a new way. And in *The Lonely Letters*, Ashon Crawley achieves the remarkable by putting this insight into practice, by enacting as well as describing Blackpentecostalism.¹¹

Notes

1. The introduction is addressed “Dear Reader.”
2. The superscript “3” accompanying chapter titles in *The Lonely Letters* is meant to “mark performance” (9).
3. “Centrifugitivity” names the mutable quality of Blackpentecostal aesthetics that always exceeds definition or fixed meaning, while “atheology” describes the harnessing of the intellectual repertoire of religious thought in ways that avoid the categorical fixity of traditional “theology.” “Choreosonicity” will be discussed in detail later in this review.
4. This resonance between texts is particularly strong throughout Crawley's published works, including “Harriet Jacobs Gets a Hearing,” which appeared in this journal in 2012. In this imaginative essay Crawley in much of *Blackpentecostal Breath* and *The Lonely Letters* with a sound studies analysis of the generative force of confinement, ultimately adumbrating a fascinating theory of “altoness”: the queer, in-between (sonic) positivity from which emerges the character of Blackpentecostal vocal expression (46-50).
5. Wynter, Sylvia. 2003. “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3 (3): 257–337. Wynter is cited throughout *The Lonely Letters*, especially this essay.
6. The distinction echoes Sarah Ahmed's critique in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010).

7. Letter B-3: perhaps a missed opportunity for instrumental punning?
8. Counterintuitively, “shouting” is a term used to describe Blackpentecostal praise dancing--its indivisible combination of musical sound, voice, movement, and proximity makes it, for Crawley, the paradigmatic example of “choreosonicity” both in *Blackpentecostal Breath* and in *The Lonely Letters*.
9. These arguments closely resemble terrain famously explored in the first chapter of Fred Moten’s *In The Break* (2003), wherein he re-examines Marx’s “commodity that speaks.”
10. See also: Crawley, Ashon. 2016. “That There Might Be Black Thought: Nothing Music and the Hammond B-3.” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 16 (2): 123–50.
11. Ashon Crawley has created a page on his personal website called “Letters to A.” where readers can respond to letters from the book and become further entangled. <https://ashon-crawley.com/letters-to-a>

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