

## “MEETING TONIGHT” EXHIBITION – INTERPRETIVE HOMILY

### *‘Like a Tree’:* Black Religious Feeling and the Arboreal Imagination

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“I see people; they look like trees walking around.”

—Mark 8:24b NIV

*I shall not, I shall not be moved*  
*Oh, I shall not, I shall not be moved*  
*Just like a tree planted by the water*  
*I shall not be moved*

—Traditional

*...you got a right to tree of life.*

—Traditional

My mother died five years ago from breast cancer. She was a devout woman, to be sure, but hardly of the dour variety. Far from sanctimonious or ascetic as is the way with some pious people, my mother laughed a lot and all the time, reflexively slapping the table or her knee with every little amusement. The light she could generate on hearing a joke or any story at all told by offbeat Uncle Hardie is glimpsed today from a headstone bearing her cheery picture beaming in perpetuity. In the crowded cemetery at Rocky Mount Baptist Church in Eufala, Alabama, my mother sleeps contented, I think, where the ground consents to hold her until the Judgment. On her headstone, the calendar facts of her living and dying are etched on a handsome block of burnished black granite. But it's down the road from there, a mile maybe, where the aliveness of my mother's memory is most dense and palpable like fog. Down the road a spell, an old pecan tree, high and wide in reach and sweep, stands confident by itself in the middle of a grassy clearing. Under its limbs, most of them aged but a few newborn, I can feel my mother's memory in the afternoon's humidity, as a rain shower at midday, in the dampness of the morning mist. There is where I close my eyes and her image is still vivid with me, the tree arcing its branches over her bending to gather the bounty of dark hard fruit it leaves on the ground for her. She loves their buttery taste and crunchiness. The connection between them—my mother and her pecan tree—feels even more real than the humidity that reminds me of them. They have always seemed like friends to me. Like covenanted friends from a long, long way back.

Perhaps it's the resemblance of the campground to the clearing where my mother's pecan tree oversees acres nobody Black was supposed to have, but the South Carolina camp meetings photographed by Holly Lynton put me in the mind of my mother (which is a Black idiomatic way of saying they bring my mother to mind). Looking at pictures of Black life in the country, remembering my mother and her pecan tree is easy, almost involuntary. For just as the trees that girdle or grow up inside the campgrounds shade the faithful from mean weather and cathedral their gathering overhead, in Eufala the tree in the clearing presumes to fulfill, by itself, a whole grove's mission. Its

branches form a baroque system of beams tied to a cerulean ceiling. Under their cover, the devout woman who has collected their leavings from girlhood discovers shelter from more than rain and heat and hail. Long leaves screen her from “the totality” of her environment. Shield her, that is, from “the total climate,” which is also the weather of Black social and political life in America. “That climate is antiblack,” a certain writer has lately said. “In what I am calling the weather,” she explains, “antiblackness is pervasive *as* climate...it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies.”<sup>1</sup> Across US time and space, against a blasphemous record of antiblack violence fueled by antiblack values like white racial destiny, Christian nationalism, purity, and property in other sentient beings, trees have quietly figured in the counter-ecology of Black life and survival. Decorating the background of a portrait of Black American being centuries-old, they forest an immense field of divine encounters and sacramental experiences finally pushed to the foreground of artistic reflection. *O! How the trees testify!*

The late great Howard Thurman—pastor, poet, theologian, race man—gave tender expression to the experience of human-tree becoming I am describing. In *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman*, he portrays a relation of reciprocity between human and arboreal life that is so much more than metaphorical. It is co-creative, world-making:

When the storms [over Daytona, Florida] blew, the branches of the large oak tree in our backyard would snap and fall. But the topmost branches of the oak tree would sway, giving way just enough to save themselves from snapping loose. I needed the strength of that tree, and, like it, I wanted to hold my ground. Eventually I discovered that the old oak tree and I had a unique relationship. I could sit, my back against its trunk, and feel the same peace that would come to me in my bed at night. I could reach down in the quiet places of my spirit, take out my bruises and my joys, unfold them, and talk about them. I could talk aloud to the oak tree and know that I was understood. It, too, was a part of my reality, like the woods...giving me space.<sup>2</sup>

This intimacy between created kinds, Black child and oak tree, would seem to recast Eden as an idyllic scene of prelapsarian co-becoming. The old oak learns to listen, and the child feels “rooted in life, in nature, in existence.” In this new light I am painting, the climactic end of the Christian story looks some different, too. So far from agreeing with the accord between child and tree in Thurman, Calvary repeats what we might call Eden’s original arboreal problem. In the Passion scene, society with trees such as that fellowship of human and natural worlds in *Head and Heart* is violently undone by the shrill hammering of an imagined co-becoming, man and tree, into a bloody, cruciform becoming-against as the Empire conscripts nature itself into its dominionist designs against the democracy of created things. From the Crucifixion at Golgotha to Red Summer in America and beyond, trees have been impressed into the service of state-sanctioned violence and made to curse the outcast (“for it is written, *Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree.*”<sup>3</sup>), in response to which history the outcast has shown little delight in trees. And the two become estranged.

But what is religion if not a reunion of the estranged—a felt, ethical binding together into one of two formerly alienated concerns? Thus, the faithful racial gathering that is the Black camp meeting answers back to the millennial conflict between trees and traumatic memory with forgiving hymns and the woods’ soft surround of joyful Black reunion. Go there and soon enough, the Spirit of good religion will come. And the campers will seem like trees themselves walking about the campgrounds. Their heads high, hands animating their speech, they will mingle or idle, catch up on who died and whose baby was born since last meeting. And come nightfall when things grow quiet, they will teach us by their example how to inhabit its stillness, how to listen for the chatter of wind and wood remembering sermons spoken and prayers prayed from ages ago. Then the leaves will disclose their

own vesperal choring, chanting the freedom-dreams of all creation—the sentient and the insensate, the living and the sleeping, the rock, the river, the tree. In that luminous darkness stretching over everything, past and present will merge into one. Memory and hope will comingle. And if you go there, there your mother may well meet you, too, with hard-shelled offerings of guidance and protection proffered from palms etched with experience, from hands you will remember straightway and trust.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Christina Sharpe *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2016), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich, 1979), 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Galatians 3:13b (KJV)