

*Spirit Soundings: Religion, Race and the Arts in Twentieth Century America*

Through an engagement with the three most iconic moments of African American cultural expression—the New Negro Movement (circa 1920-30s), the Black Arts Movement (circa 1960-70s), and the Word Movement (circa 1980-90s)—*Spirit Soundings* explores how shifting notions of religion and spirituality have figured into efforts to theorize a racial aesthetic over the course of the twentieth century. While each of these movements are generally cast as secular or secularizing, if not profane, this study reveals religion to be a consistent and critical, albeit contested, ingredient in debates regarding black art and culture.

Most concisely, *Spirit Soundings* is a historical project that employs the arts and popular culture to engage questions in the field of religious studies. It advances the claim that black aesthetic debates bear witness to religious tensions in African/American culture in particular historical moments. That is, artists and critics who theorized a racial aesthetic have discussed religion in particular ways, celebrating certain religious practices and critiquing others, in ways that reflect the particular historical contexts in which they wrote, and in doing so they reveal the impact of circulating normative definitions of religion on black cultural production. In each era, religion and spirituality function as key categories for identifying what is (or is not) perceived to constitute or contribute to a racial aesthetic. Ultimately, *Spirit Soundings* works to disentangle the myriad ways that race and religion have been interwoven in the construction of black identities in Diaspora.