



# THE PRINCETON SEMINARY BULLETIN

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The Princeton Seminary Bulletin is published annually  
by Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey

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## Performing Prosperity, Promoting Pride!

*Jonathan L. Walton*

*Dr. Jonathan L. Walton is Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Professor of Religion and Society at Harvard Divinity School. He delivered the Geddes W. Hanson Lecture on October 21, 2014.*

Let me begin by expressing my deepest appreciation to the “powers that be” here at Princeton Theological Seminary. To President Craig Barnes, Dean James Kay, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty, esteemed alums, gifted students, hardworking staff, faithful grounds, operations, and security crew, and from the hands that prepare and serve food in McKay to all those invisible hands who do the heavy lifting of cleaning up after us, I say to you thank you. And, most importantly, I see you.

I want to thank you for affording me this opportunity to stand here today as the 2014 Geddes W. Hanson lecturer. This is an honor that I am hard pressed to describe. I’ve had the privilege and good pleasure of sharing my work in a lot of different places among what some might consider prestigious company. Yet nothing has ever compared to this feeling. I say this for a couple of reasons.

For one, I am home. This campus is home. Princeton Seminary provided the physical place and intellectual space to discern my vocation, as well as the intellectual tools to empower me to then pursue it. I will be forever indebted to this institution. I pray that the research that is presented in this lecture will reflect well on the wonderful professors, research librarians, and classmates who trained me on this campus.

Second, from my very first semester at the seminary as an MDiv student I was welcomed into the home of a seemingly grouchy, grumpy, cantankerous professor named Geddes Hanson. He was a mystery to me. Because I could not understand how somebody with such a bad attitude was married to somebody who was so beautiful, warm, and welcoming. Yet it did not take long to figure out that the grouchy, grumpy, cantankerous professor bit was all an act. In fact, I think it was revealed to me the first time I had dinner at the Hanson home. Doc Hanson was lecturing me about something with all the authority and grouch he could muster, when a seemingly exasperated Carrie looked at him and said, “Sit down and eat your food!”—to which Doc quickly replied, “Yes, Dear.”

And over the past two decades, Doc and Carrie Hanson, as well as his beloved big sister Avis Hanson, have become for me, my wife Cecily, and our three children, an additional set of parents and grandparents that we are bound to with the ties of love. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that we don’t earn good friends or family, God gives them to us. And there is not a day that goes by that I don’t thank God for giving me Doc and Carrie Hanson. Because of their service and personal sacrifices, it was possible

for someone like me to earn a PhD from this institution. And this endowed lecture is a testament and testimony of their profound contributions to theological education.

### Pentecostal Made Pretty: A Picture Window of the Prosperity Gospel<sup>1</sup>

In the second half of the twentieth century, one might argue that among evangelicals, all paths of ecclesiastical ingenuity and theological creativity extended out of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Evangelist Kenneth Hagin's Rhema Bible Training College became the premier training ground of the Word of Faith Movement, also known as the health and wealth gospel. Oral Roberts University continued to produce students who would become major players in the world of evangelical media and publishing, such as Steve Strang, founder and CEO of Charisma Publishing. And when it came to hitting the "big time" in regards to the preaching or gospel music circuits, there was arguably none other as influential as evangelist and recording artist Carlton Pearson.

Each year throughout the 1990s, up to fifty-thousand evangelicals made their way to the campus of Oral Roberts University for a weeklong celebration which he dubbed, "the AZUSA Conference." The title paid homage to what many consider the genesis of Pentecostalism in America, the AZUSA Street Revival of 1906 led by Holiness preacher William Seymour in Los Angeles. Like the original revival, Pearson's meetings were multiracial, marked by singing and preaching, and embraced gifts of the Holy Spirit, most notably the gift of speaking in tongues. Both gatherings also welcomed worshippers from across the denominational spectrum—Holiness, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Baptists came to AZUSA. One year Pearson even featured a gospel-singing, Jewish brother named Joshua Nelson. Like the original revival, Pearson's AZUSA erected a big tent.

The similarities pretty much end here.

The luxurious Mabee Center auditorium was a far cry from the dilapidated church building at 312 Azusa Street. Prior to Seymour's group securing the Azusa Street property as a rental, the sawdust-floor church house served as a storage warehouse and barn. Other differences set the events further apart than the span of the century. No musical instruments were used at the original revival. Pearson's AZUSA gathered together the some of the best musicians in the nation. Seymour did not take up any collection, much less pay honoraria to speakers. Pearson collected an excess of \$100,000 in offerings per night, and paid preachers and singers on average an honorarium of \$10,000. And worshippers who made their way to the original AZUSA revival were known more for the ascetic aesthetic of sartorial simplicity. Those who strolled into Pearson's gathering came decked out like a fashion show. Not only was everyone dressed to impress, you never knew what favorite televangelist or gospel singer you might see sitting in your

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1 See the video and images that accompany this lecture here: [ptsem.edu/waltonlecture2014](http://ptsem.edu/waltonlecture2014).

row. Just as we saw how people were “shocked to discover” that Grammy-award winning gospel icon Walter Hawkins of the legendary Hawkins family “has been here all week long and has hardly missed a service,” Pearson was intentional about orchestrating such spontaneous moves of the spirit. At least one well-choreographed “impromptu” performance per night was enough to keep the auditorium full of suspense and anticipation.

You saw the footage. Pearson was a performer par excellence—gifts honed as a child leading the choir at the Jackson Memorial Church of God in Christ with Bishop J.A. Blake in San Diego, and then as a member of the World Action Singers as a student at Oral Roberts University. Some of you may also recognize another World Action Singer that went on to fame. Before joining forces with Regis, Kathie Lee Epstein accompanied Carlton Pearson and Oral Roberts!

Understanding both choreography and cinematography, and being sensitive to the timing as well as tempo of the service are what distinguished Pearson from the scores of other evangelists whom could sing and/or preach. Pearson was a student and innovator of the televised revival meeting.

The charisma on stage is as captivating and vibrant as the bold colors that adorn flesh. Royal blue suits, fire truck red blouses, and canary yellow dresses pop out from a pastel background. Colorful clothes constitute part of the kinetic energy impelled by rhythmic bodies of the choir. A Hammond B-3 organ catalyzed this spiritual pageant that fused the frenzy and fervor of black Protestantism with the showmanship and choreography of a Hollywood variety show. The result was an extravagant scene of hype and ballyhoo. When frozen, the visual frame looks like a showroom window that would have made late nineteenth century advertising guru and *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* author L. Frank Baum proud. AZUSA footage charms and captivates.

The scene, in many ways, captures Pearson's spiritual imagination and what he believed to be his divine call. Pearson conceived himself a bridge builder. He connected traditional and contemporary expressions of his faith—what scholars of religion now refer to as neo-Pentecostalism. He connected white Assemblies of God Pentecostals, African American Oneness Apostolics (T.D. Jakes), and other evangelical denominations such as Baptists and Methodists. And he sought to connect what he believed was the rich faith of a people mired in material lack and poverty to new possibilities characterized by material plenty and prosperity.

Having been raised a fourth-generation African American Pentecostal in what he often refers to as the “ghettoes of San Diego,” Pearson contends that Oral Roberts University in Tulsa provided him with another view of the faith of his foreparents—a Pentecostalism not characterized by compensatory claims to Holiness to obscure social marginalization, but a Pentecostalism that was mainstream, socially accepted, and, above all, desirable. In reflecting back on the moment he drove up to the campus of Oral Roberts University

(ORU) in 1971 as an eighteen year old freshmen, he says one of the first thoughts that came to his mind was, "How could a tongue-talking, bible-thumping Pentecostal preacher build this? And I compared it to the Church of God in Christ. I wanted my church to have ORU. And on that day I started to want to make Pentecostalism pretty. Oral and Kathryn (Kuhlman) brought dignity to Pentecostalism.... I wanted to mix her and Oral to bring that sort of dignity to my people."<sup>2</sup>

### Prosperity Gospel as Social Capital and Spiritual Capital

To be sure, a few scholars over the past decade, including myself, have written about Pearson, the AZUSA conference, and the prominent televangelists such as Joyce Meyer and T.D. Jakes, who gained national followings at this conference. Shayne Lee and Phil Sinitiere's *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and America's Spiritual Marketplace* and Scott Billingsley's *It's A New Day: Race and Gender in the Modern Charismatic Movement* introduce us to contemporary televangelists like T.D. Jakes and Paula White and the religious contexts from which their theology and ecclesiastical approaches developed. My Harvard colleague, anthropologist Marla Frederick's *Between Sundays: Black Women and Everyday Struggles of Faith*, as well as her forthcoming book *Colored Television: Religion, Media, and Racial Uplift in the Black Atlantic World*, move beyond production of messages to examine the many ways women of color consume and interpret religious broadcasting. Frederick examines women's engagement with hyper-gendered, often masculinist, meaning-making and how everyday yet sophisticated female consumers decode such messages for personal empowerment.

Frederick's monograph and articles modeled the shifts in religion and media studies that some members of the International Society for Religion, Media and Culture, have recently suggested was sorely needed.<sup>3</sup> In the same way that gender has been a blind spot in the field of religion, media and culture, Marla Frederick's important work on women of color throughout the diaspora is in the blind spot of the blind spot. We would all do better to pay closer attention to this important group: women of color who consume liberally but critically pervasive themes on what it means to be human along the binary of male and female.

What is more, up to this point, my engagement with Pearson and other televangelists of color has been primarily concerned with identifying theological, ecclesiastical, and cultural particularities toward underscoring difference. Evangelists like Rev. Ike, Carlton Pearson, and Creflo Dollar must be distinguished from their conservative, white contemporaries. Of course there are similarities. We are discussing a quintessentially American phenomenon. But to view these evangelists as Oral Roberts, Paul Crouch,

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2 Jonathan L. Walton, Interview with Bishop Carlton Pearson. Tulsa, Oklahoma, 2005.

3 M. Lovheim, ed., *Media, Religion, and Gender: Key Issues and New Challenges* (London; New York, Routledge, 2013).

or Kenneth Copeland in blackface commits violence against the evangelists and communities under consideration.<sup>4</sup>

Nor have I have ever felt comfortable reducing such displays of prosperity to innovative strategies toward cornering a religious market, as does the work of some sociologists writing on this topic. The “rational choice” theories that inform such conclusions are often substantiated by cherry-picked, after-the-fact evidence that ignore a whole host of cultural stimulants and affective responses to which we are often not privy. People gravitate toward messages of theological prosperity for a wide-range of reasons not evident to producers. Hence, I want to temper commendations of “spiritual genius” that we often ascribe to producers in order to leave room for intentional and innovative interpretive license on the part of participants—innovative interpretations that are located within multi-traditioned, historical frameworks and cultural structures of feeling that inform religious, racial, regional, and a whole host of other intersecting identities and communities.

And along this same vein, I also want to expand my own previous position that provided an account of crass displays of conspicuous consumption as a means of “*Bourdieuian*” distinction.<sup>5</sup> In discussing figures like Rev. Ike and Prophet James F. Jones, who the New York Post dubbed the “Messiah in Mink,” I argued that the cultural performance of prosperity allows the faithful to distance themselves from the ordinary masses and thus garner both spiritual and social capital. Persons garner spiritual capital by demonstrating how their religion produces the same, if not better, material rewards as privileged members of a society that the faithful regard as inaccessible and, more often than not, immoral. This spiritual capital, then, is immediately transformed into social capital. Prosperity typifies power and influence.

I still affirm this position to a degree. Many believe that visible cultural markers of distinction such as fancy clothes and fine cars generate social advantage and establish class status. In a highly stratified and increasingly immobile society such as the United States, performances of prosperity provide a means for persons to seek prestige, at least, on a micro level. What I have not considered are the historical roots of such a belief in the dominant society that might give even greater credence to prosperity gospel proponents. This is to say, when we consider the ways consumerism and citizenship have been bound up in a symbiotic relationship in the United States of America since the late 19th century, the prosperity gospel might be viewed as an example of the structure of feeling which emerged in an insecure middle-class consciousness with the development of consumer capitalism.

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4 Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

5 Jonathan L. Walton, “The Greening of the Gospel (and Black Body): Rev Ike’s Gospel of Wealth and Post-Blackness Theology,” *PNEUMA: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 33(2) (2011): 181–199.

## Commodification and Citizenship

This is why I am trying to start a new conversation with the material. I want to use Pearson and his ministry to connect the dots between commodification and citizenship. Many of you understand the logic of religious commodification—the process by which a religious performer gives up their body as an object that is subsequently transformed into a market good. But what does it mean to situate this logic of religious commodification squarely within a larger landscape of mass consumption that establishes the boundaries and contours for being and belonging, humanity and citizenship?

I want to suggest that Pearson used his AZUSA conferences and the technologies of production and distribution to do more than offer himself up as a religious commodity to be marketed and sold. In examining the broad scope of his religious theatre, Pearson transformed participants into objects that modeled the spiritual goods he embodied; Pearson created a picture window of prosperity and empowered living by way of religious fidelity. By doing so, when considering his larger historical frame and particular cultural context, it could be that he was making a claim that surpassed pecuniary concern and theological claims—maybe, just maybe, Pearson was making a claim of African American citizenship.

This is why I have come to believe that when we drill down we see a more specific tradition of political response with Pearson. Carlton Pearson's AZUSA conferences and associated video box sets function as a visual counter-narrative that challenges white supremacist assumptions about black Pentecostalism in particular, and African American citizenship in general. In creating this visual theatre of black Pentecostal opulence in the final quarter of the twentieth century, Pearson was unwittingly extending a form of antiracist resistance that dates back one hundred years—antiracist resistance that employs the tools of visual culture with the specific intent of disrupting prevailing ideological claims that locate certain racialized and religious bodies outside of the larger body politic. He is representing both blackness and Pentecostalism in a particular way insofar as the latter was perceived as a cultural anchor holding down bodies that were already fighting for inclusion—the marginalized of the minoritized.

In citing the relationship between consumerism and citizenship in American society, I am relying on the work of cultural historians William Leach and Lizabeth Cohen. Leach's *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* argues convincingly that American corporate business and key institutions collaborated to create a future-oriented culture of desire in America that defined the good life according to the consumption of consumer goods. Acquisition and consumption were the key features of what Leach refers to as this "cult of the new," which made American society seemingly more democratic, democratizing desire, while ignoring wealth, political access, and economic opportunities, which make access to this form of happiness possible. The glass showroom window that developed in the early twentieth century becomes the



synecdoche of this tantalizing and titillating visual culture. The glass is democratizing as everyone can see through it, even while it de-democratizes by denying access to the masses. The show window typifies the paradox of so-called empowered consumer culture. Consumerism is lauded as the great social leveler, even as the glass represents the unilateral power of access and denial of merchants.

Lizabeth Cohen's *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* makes a similar historical argument, but she makes explicit how the often-isolated ideal types of citizen and consumer were in constant tension and overlap. This tension reveals the permeability of America's political and economic spheres, making particular note of the protracted struggle of minoritized groups, such as women and African Americans, in the postwar era. The citizen-consumer ideal was embraced not only by New Deal policymakers but social groups on the political margins. In Cohen's words, "identification as consumers offered a new opportunity to make claims on those wielding public and private power in American society."<sup>6</sup>

Now earlier I said that Pearson's AZUSA conferences and associated video box sets are a part of a longstanding tradition of political response—a tradition of response that employs the tools of visual culture as a counter-narrative to challenge white supremacist representations of black life as well as racial cultural privilege of the gaze—a gaze that authorizes who has the power to look, as well as who has the power to determine what will be seen.<sup>7</sup>

## Representations in Visual Culture

One of the earliest examples of this takes place at the Paris Exposition in 1900. William Edward Burghardt Du Bois compiled a collection of 500 photographs for the "American Negro Exhibit." Within this exhibit, Du Bois created the Georgia Negro albums filled with hundreds of photographs of blacks engaged in a wide range of activities. There are no names. Locations are not identified. Relationships among individuals in the photos are not made explicit. Yet they capture the aesthetic markers of middle-class prosperity—beautiful homes filled with bookshelves, a young lady playing the piano, and a serious and stern man sitting in his study are just a few of the photos in the exhibit. One might assume that such a strategy puts interpretive pressure on the viewer with the intent of disrupting and dismantling negatively held assumptions that inform the gaze that views blackness as an *a priori* problem.

An international jury awarded Du Bois a gold medal for these images that clearly performed revolutionary political and countercultural work at the turn of the 20th

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6 Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 32.

7 For the most powerful and thorough treatment of this topic, see: S. M. Smith, *Photography of the color line: W.E.B. Du Bois, Race, and Visual Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

century. Part of the genius of projecting yet not commenting on these bodies was how it implicitly identifies the double bind of black prosperity, a concept that was viewed by many as an inherent contradiction.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, social Darwinists and neo-Lamarckian's provided the "scientific" justification of Negro inferiority needed to not only end America's short-lived experiment of a multiracial democracy during Reconstruction, but also justify the codification of political, social, and economic disenfranchisement of African Americans. Cultural denigration of black humanity did not just descend down from the "American School" of ethnography at University of Pennsylvania, the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard, Yale's *laissez-faire* sociology, or Columbia's Dunning school of history, it emerged in many different forms of mass culture.

Consider Harper's, the premier national weekly newspaper in the late nineteenth century. For two decades they ran a series of cartoons lampooning a fictive "Blackville." These sketches featured a large family named rather inappropriately "the Smallbreeds" and the prevailing theme of the series was to disparage African American elites, and all African Americans who demonstrated any level of social aspirations. This cartoon is entitled, "Decorative art has at last reached Blackville." You can see the cacophonous clash of chintzy items that crowd the room, while there is a man clearly painting everything his paintbrush can touch. One of the hosts brags in a supposed Southern, black vernacular, "Dat small Japan jug cum from the ruins of Pompey."

"The phrenologist at Blackville" stands before a crowd, adorning similar affluent affect, and declares over a cross-eyed young man with a guileless grin on his face, "Dis young gemmun am a born poet. Ideality consumes nearly de entire skull." The joke being not only in the mocking of failed performances of intellect on the part of the scientist and crowd, but the manner in which the imbecilic young man becomes representative of the entire group. Ideality is confused for intelligence is the punchline. Platitudinous proclamations and performances of social desire are confused for the intellectual and artistic work of the poet.

Then there is the black bourgeois bridal party. The caption reads, "After doing Paris and the rest of Europe, the bridal party return to Blackville." One notices the reason that the two couples did Paris and the rest of Europe. It is the two babies in the arms of an accompanying nanny that were clearly born of the newlyweds while the couples were away. In the mind of the famed nineteenth century artist and creator of Blackville, Sol Eytinge Jun, the couple's proud posture serves as a source of amusement and mockery among other residents of Blackville, as demonstrated by the woman laughing behind the tree. This is not to mention how the fine wears and dandyism of the newlyweds clash against the rural and poverty stricken landscape that is Blackville.

There are so many other examples. In fact, just as the construction of toy departments within larger department stores were essential in creating sanctuaries of desire in early

twentieth-century America, the first mass marketing toy success in the United States was a mechanical tap dancing African American male figurine. The toy was named, “the Alabama Coon Jigger.” You will notice the spatted shoes, suit, and tie, as yet the caricature makes a not-so-subtle allusion to the rightful role of African Americans despite outward appearance—the servicing of the white middle class, either by domesticity or entertainment. According to Shawn Michelle Smith, in reference to these sorts of representations of blackness in mass culture, “the white middle classes naturalized their own social positions by lampooning the ‘unnatural’ aspirations of ‘unevolved’ African Americans.”<sup>8</sup>

These are the naturalized social positions that Du Bois’s photo project sought to challenge—and he did so on the same ideological terrain of racial imagery. He provided data in the forms of charts and maps to show the distribution and development of African Americans over the four decades since Emancipation. But he supplements these figures with the work of African American photographer Thomas Askew in order to ask what he views as an inevitable question of “What are these people doing for themselves?” To this Du Bois replies, “there is in the whole building no more encouraging answer than that given by the American negroes, who are here shown to be studying, examining, and thinking of their own progress and prospects.”<sup>9</sup>

### Economic Prosperity and the Tulsa Race Riots

What does this brief history of the ideological contestation of the black middle-class have to do with Pearson? I am beginning to think everything. Particularly based on the specific context and history of Tulsa, Oklahoma—the location of one of the most horrific tragedies and acts of domestic terrorism in the twentieth century, the so-called Tulsa Race Riots of 1921. At this time, an estimated 10,000 African Americans lived in north Tulsa in a section known as Greenwood. Like the oil industry that spurred the city’s growth, north Tulsa was known as a center of opportunity and affluence for African Americans. The Greenwood section was widely referred to as Black Wall Street, as it was populated with business owners, lawyers, and domestics that earned higher than average wages inside the homes of wealthy oil barons in South Tulsa. The community also benefitted from a vibrant nightlife, as white laborers, both itinerants and locals, would frequent the saloons and after-hour spots that Greenwood provided. And while local white preachers sermonized about the impure and intemperate life of the Negro based predominantly on Greenwood’s multiracial nightlife, the money was flowing into large brick homes, minks, top of the line Vitrolas, and new automobiles among Greenwood’s black residents.

While I do not need to go into the specifics of the riot here, we know it to be a familiar

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8 Ibid., 80.

9 W. E. B. Du Bois, “The American Negro at Paris,” *The American Monthly Review of Reviews: An International Magazine* XXII(July–December 1900): 577.

story. White working class mobs wiped out the town, destroying over four million dollars in property (forty million dollars today) in less than twelve hours. Also when the National Guard was called in, airplanes flown in World War I flew overhead to drop explosives, making Tulsa the first city to endure an aerial assault in the United States. One couple for instance, lost an eight-room house, their car, and three hundred dollars in gold coins. In the months that followed, sixty to eighty percent of the population became literal wards of the state living in detention centers and forced to wear green tags on their clothing. Another ten percent left Tulsa altogether, never to return.

Yet due to the conspiracy of silence that surrounded these events throughout the twentieth century, including in Tulsa, performances of economic prosperity among African Americans always carried a heightened political meaning. You are talking about a group of people that literally had had a bomb dropped on them for being successful. At Mount Zion Baptist Church, middle class African Americans who broke free of the segregation of Tulsa's First Baptist pooled their resources to build one of the most stately and distinguished churches in the city. They named themselves Mount Zion rather than Second Baptist at their founding because these African Americans of Greenwood said that there were not second to anyone. Yet within one month of completion, the entire edifice was reduced to rubble by the riots.

This is the context in which Carlton Pearson preached and performed his particular brand of prosperity. It should also not be lost on us that it was in the 1990s that South Tulsa and the nation began to break the silence around the riot, as lawyers Johnny Cochran and Charles Ogletree began a national campaign to secure reparations for survivors and direct descendants of survivors—including some names that you might recognize, such as the late historian John Hope Franklin and Professor Cornel West, whose grandfather was the pastor of Metropolitan Baptist Church in Greenwood.

Moreover, during this same period Carlton Pearson began publishing a lifestyle magazine entitled *ExcellStyle: Excellence in Successful Living*. Pearson hired Shari Horner-Tisdale, a Tulsa native to serve as publisher and editor-in-chief of the magazine. Before assuming this position, she was the Executive Administrator for the Greenwood Cultural Center, and her role was to raise awareness about the history of Greenwood and use a two-and-a-half-million-dollar grant supplied by the state to create programs to empower the North Tulsa community. The magazine was filled with articles on prosperity from a theological perspective, but also empowered living via civic engagement and entrepreneurial impulse. Articles offer advice on finance and home buying tips, and the magazine was replete with images of successful African American business owners and residents of Tulsa. Interestingly enough, many of the models pictured in these pages, like Du Bois's exhibit, do not have captions. There sartorially sophisticated bodies, like those filmed inside of the Mabee Center, speak for themselves. They are present. They are prosperous. They are a part of the American project.

There is one additional reason that I want to consider Carlton Pearson's televangelistic efforts and visual framing of prosperity within this tradition of political response—it is because I discovered that he was not even the first African American preacher in Tulsa to engage in this sort of activity. While researching the history of Tulsa, I came across the name Solomon Sir Jones, an African American Baptist minister who traveled throughout the state of Oklahoma in the 1920s in order to capture African American prosperity on film. In 2006, an Oklahoma state senator purchased the 29 vintage canisters of film from an antique dealer in Tulsa where he immediately had them digitized. Luckily, Yale purchased them in 2009 at auction and has since made them available to the public.

These silent films offer a window into the black middle class in Tulsa as it sought to rebuild after the riots. I have taken a few of the snippets to show here. They include members of the local chapter of the National Negro Business League, a black owned insurance company, clothing store, bottling company, and funeral home. Reverend Jones also films images of the rubble that remains, which was once Mount Zion Baptist's new building. They serve as documented proof of black progress—progress that must be proven on the ideological terrain of visual imagery with evidence.

And when we consider the particularities of this history that take into consideration race and place, I do not feel as comfortable writing off Pearson as simply trying to sell a pie-in-the sky theology. We might be able to locate him within a much larger and longer tradition of political response wherein African Americans were making claims to citizenship through demonstrations of economic potential and power as consumers. Now we can debate the merits of this strategy at both the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. For now, however, that is beside the point. Because what I see here is a prosperity gospel that is not just grounded in the tradition of spiritualism, New Thought philosophies, and postwar charismatic revivalism. But rather the prosperity gospel serves as a visual counter-narrative in order to empower perceived marginalized Protestant bodies in the vein of unapologetically ideological racial representation. In this context, then, the prosperity gospel becomes the picture window of black progress, success and American citizenship. Thus, like DuBois, when someone asks Carlton Pearson the question "what are black Pentecostals doing for themselves?" he, too, might answer, "there is in the whole building no more encouraging answer than that given by these largely African American Pentecostals, who are here at AZUSA shown to be studying, examining, and thinking of their own progress and prospects."