

September 16, 2020

Dear Colleagues at the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History,

Thank you for taking the time to read my work. This essay, “Black Suffering and Spiritual Protest in the Age of US Empire,” will be published in Sylvester Johnson and Tisa Wenger, eds. *On Imperial Grounds: New Histories of Religion and US Empire* (under contract with New York University Press). The volume is the result of a multi-year collaborative research project that has involved several workshops, as well as the creation of the Seminar on Religion and US Empire (RUSE) at the American Academy of Religion (2014-2019). When I first joined the RUSE working group, I had planned to contribute a piece related to my study of evangelical media and American humanitarianism. After the publication of several essays and a book on that theme, however, I was ready to move on to something new. My current project (the one I will focus on as a Faculty Fellow at the Warren Center this year), is a religious biography of Ida B. Wells-Barnett (under contract with Oxford University Press for their Spiritual Lives series). Although I have conducted a fair amount of research for this study, the work is still in the formative stages. “Black Suffering and Spiritual Protest in the Age of US Empire” is my first effort to write about Wells and her religious worlds.

I took seriously the invitation from the leaders of our Seminar on Religion and Public Life in North America to present a draft that is truly a work in progress. Since I began writing earlier this summer, I have struggled to clarify my argument, rewritten the introduction three times, and wondered about the scope of the study (which situates Wells within larger global networks of spiritual protest against black suffering and imperial expansion). My anxieties about the piece have become even more acute since learning earlier this week that I will need to significantly shorten it for publication. In current form, the word count (including notes – which you will see are incomplete in this version) is almost 13,000. The final needs to be closer to 8,000 (maybe 9,000 if the editors are generous)! I would therefore welcome your feedback on how to move forward most productively.

I am especially curious to hear whether you think the multiple stories I weave together here cohere. Or, is the narrative too confusing and circuitous? Have I done enough (or too much) in the introduction to prepare the reader for what follows? Is the argument clear and compelling? If not, how can I state my case with greater precision? Finally, what parts of the essay should I excise? Should I try to streamline each section or are there whole segments that I should cut out completely? One possibility would be to refocus the analysis solely on Wells, rather than linking her campaign for racial justice with other efforts to relieve black oppression. I am hoping to avoid that approach, but beginning to wonder if it would make the most sense.

I look forward to our conversation.

With gratitude,  
Heather