

Cole Arthur Riley. *Black Liturgies: Prayers, Poems, and Meditations for Staying Human*. Convergent, 2024. 336 pages. \$22.00.

Dear Reader,

It's a beautiful late summer evening in Indiana, and I am currently enjoying looking at the light that hits the trees just outside my office window. During this golden hour, I am reminded of the invitation of breath that Cole Arthur Riley offers in her work, *Black Liturgies*. You may be wondering why you are reading a letter when you are supposed to be reading a more traditional book review. I often find it difficult to offer an official review for books that call us to creative rest. They offer resources for what our hearts long for, putting words to longings we have not yet been able to articulate. Through words, they carve out space and time for rest, reflection, and rejuvenation. And in that way, reviewing or grading them feels wrong. This is exactly how I felt reading *Black Liturgies*. This text has created so much space personally for me and for others who are wrestling with the spaces that their faith seems to demand, but their bodies are not able to go. Perhaps this is because we are dealing with the kind of whiteness, heteronormativity, and patriarchy that restricts our bodies but demands our spirits to assimilate into a way we were never meant to be. *Black Liturgies* gives us room to reclaim our agency and power to become all that we are and to allow our faith to not forget our bodies. Because of this, I ask that you allow me the liberty of being inspired by this work to offer a reflection that mimics its structure.

INHALE: This isn't what I thought it was going to be

EXHALE: I am open to the experience

In so many ways, *Black Liturgies* is a love letter to my frustrations and my hope. Offered in two parts, Riley captures the kind of spiritual emergence that is just as painful as it is wonderful. She artfully incorporates letters that offer snapshots into her life (an exquisite form of storytelling we encounter in her previous work, *This Here Flesh*), with breathwork, prayers, poetry, and confessions. The first section is dedicated to the questions and longings of the human experience (Belonging and Wonder are two of my favorites), while the second offers liturgies for moments in time (including traditional liturgical calendar dates and other cultural moments like Juneteenth). Although you can, it is not a work I would recommend reading cover to cover. This is something you are meant to live *in* and *with*.

INHALE: Not everything is for my consumption

EXHALE: I get to take my time

One of the most important aspects of this text is the focus on the emergent and expansive nature of black spirituality. Conceived in a time of wrestling and reclaiming of Riley's own spiritual story and birthed through social media in response to the continued harm to black bodies, *Black Liturgies* itself becomes a portal to the kinds of worlds where Black bodies and experiences are centered and seen.

A prayer as you read *Black Liturgies*:

To the One who sees: We often come to texts eager for what they will teach us. We want to learn, to know, to master. In doing so, we can miss the opportunity that this work invites us to. Remind us that it is ok to take our time. Let the prayers and breath invocation of this work stop us in our tracks. When we are eager to read and finish so that we can say we've conquered the material, make us lie down and rest. For those of us who come to this material as a non-black person, remind us that our decentering is not a threat. For those of us who are black, remind us not to shy away from being seen and heard. Let this work give us permission to stand fully in our rage, our

lament, our hope, and our joy. Let the practice of the breath remind us that we are here, that you and the ancestors are with us, and much like our life, our breath matters.

It is my hope that you will not only read *Black Liturgies*, but that you will allow the work to inspire the kinds of practices that invoke a wonder and dignity immersed throughout its pages.

Tamisha A. Tyler, Visiting Assistant Professor of Theology and Culture, and Theopoetics,
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