



BLACK LITURGIES

PRAYERS, POEMS, AND MEDITATIONS
FOR STAYING HUMAN

COLE ARTHUR RILEY

New York Times bestselling author of *THIS HERE FLESH*

Advance Praise for *Black Liturgies*

“Cole Arthur Riley is a spiritual guide and a gift in our lives. Restoring us to ourselves and reminding us of our humanness, our fragility, and the strength of faith, she calls us back to community, to breath, to our god-given selves. *Black Liturgies* is true spiritual balm for our troubled times.”

—MICHAEL ERIC DYSON, PhD, *New York Times* bestselling author of *What Truth Sounds Like*

“*Black Liturgies* is a garden for the soul. With rare wisdom, beautiful clarity, and generous vulnerability, Arthur Riley brings her whole self to these letters, verses, and promptings, offering bright, deep truths about who we are and can be as Black women, Black people, and human beings. Hold these luminous words close and let them be your balm.”

—TIYA MILES, PhD, National Book Award–winning author of *All That She Carried*

“Cole Arthur Riley is a blessed seer and curate. In *Black Liturgies* she nurtures souls, hearts, and intellects through storytelling, prayer, and deep reflection. Readers will be deeply moved by the beauty of her writing and her moral clarity, tenderness, and wisdom. This is a book to cherish and share.”

—IMANI PERRY, PhD, National Book Award–winning author of *South to America* and columnist at *The Atlantic*

“This is a curation of musings that renders the Spirit accessibly real—not up in the ‘heavens’ or beyond our reach, but right here within. In our hands, we hold a sacred Blackness. *Black Liturgies* will quiet you and guide you into the limitless space of your self.”

—YABA BLAY, PhD, cultural worker and author of *One Drop: Shifting the Lens on Race*

“Cole Arthur Riley continues to show that she is one of this time’s most powerful and potent writers on the body and spirit. What she shares is at once quiet and honest, intimate and profound. The prayers in this book

seem to rise from our own cracks and breaks, from the deep well of Blackness itself. They remind us to pray only to the God that could know us and love us, and that intended us to be this beautiful and this human.”

—PRENTIS HEMPHILL, author of *What It Takes to Heal* and founder of the Embodiment Institute

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Contents

Entrance
Architecture

PART ONE: BY STORY

1. DIGNITY
2. SELFHOOD
3. PLACE
4. WONDER
5. ARTISTRY
6. CALLING
7. BODY
8. BELONGING
9. DOUBT
10. LAMENT
11. FEAR
12. RAGE
13. SECRETS
14. POWER
15. JUSTICE
16. REPAIR
17. REST
18. JOY
19. LOVE
20. MEMORY
21. MORTALITY

PART TWO: BY TIME

1. DAWN
 2. DAY
 3. DUSK
 4. ADVENT
 5. CHRISTMASTIDE
 6. EPIPHANY
 7. KWANZAA
 8. ASH WEDNESDAY
 9. LENT
 10. PALM SUNDAY
 11. MAUNDY THURSDAY
 12. GOOD FRIDAY
 13. SILENT SATURDAY
 14. EASTER
 15. PENTECOST
 16. MOTHER'S DAY
 17. FATHER'S DAY
 18. JUNETEENTH
 19. BIRTH
 20. REUNION
 21. HOMEGOING
 22. NEW YEAR'S
- LITURGICAL TEMPLATE FOR ALTERNATIVE OCCASIONS

Acknowledgments

References

Prayer Index

Taking Notes



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If you are using a touch-screen reader or app, simply hold your finger over the first word in the line and then select “Note” to create a note and begin typing your answer.

If you are using a non-touch-screen reader, move your cursor up to the line where you want to enter an answer and then begin typing to create a new note.

You can then reference your answers anytime you are reading the ebook as they will be stored as notes on your device.

Entrance

I NEVER wanted to write a prayer book. I grew, and my love for writing grew, at a great distance from Christian literature of any kind. By the time I was in college, I had developed enough of a palate (and arrogance) for what I deemed “serious” literary fiction that I would find myself internally wincing at book recommendations in the church I’d begun attending. The same suspicion I felt toward their God was mapped onto his alleged scribes. I believed (and still largely do) that the most trustworthy, and perhaps meaningful, literature can be found in the economy of the short story, the nuance of the memoir, the imagery of the poem. Literature—real art—could not be found in a church pew; how could it? Religion’s purpose is to bring mystery close enough to touch. We give God a name, a face. We write creeds to outline the conditions of our belief. This requires that the mystery stay still and at times contract. But art has little concern for definition, certainty, or even permanence; it survives by the mystery expanding and re-creating itself. In *Parable of the Sower*, for example, Octavia Butler is not interested in telling you *what* precisely to believe about Lauren’s desire to leave the walled neighborhood in the middle of apocalypse. She only cares if you rise and go on the journey.

Lucille Clifton put it, “You come to poetry not out of what you know but out of what you wonder.” It is conveyance, rarely indoctrination. In this way, good art is necessarily queer—fluid and subversive and impermanent. Religion, stripped of such queerness, can be excessively clear and uncompromising in its rigidity. But when practiced well, religion—or more broadly, spirituality—has the capacity to tether incomprehensible mystery to the beauty and pain of the human heart. It is not the only way to do so, but it is one way.

To be a writer with any sincere concern for the human condition as we’ve known it, one must contend with the spiritual. This is inescapable.

The question, I suppose, is one of form. I want a mystery that contracts so that I can dare approach, that I can turn over in the palm of my hand but then watch pass through my fingers and become the air I breathe. I want a spirituality that demands artistry, not just from the divine but from me. All of this has required me to interrogate if I believe the form of liturgy has any merit. As you are reading these words, you can rightfully assume I've come to the admission that it does.

I was twenty-three when I walked into an Episcopal church with an overwhelming desire to die. The service began with a hymn. Two dozen elderly choir members hovered above us from the loft, singing words I couldn't make out, which has its own way of making you feel alone. But then all around me people began to speak the liturgy aloud. *Blessed be God. And blessed be God's kingdom, now and for ever.* As the voices began their recitation, a few things occurred in me at once. First, defiance—the atoms of me surged in resistance. To recite words like some mindless zombie? I had my own thoughts, my own idealized individualism to protect. The second, chills. The voices of the room blurred together, all speaking in unison. How strange this landed on the senses. What cult was this? Liturgy can feel eerie, especially to those of us who know what it is to have a mob chant words in unison, not for beauty or mystery, but for destruction. But the third, relief—complicated and undeniable relief. It can be difficult to find the words to pray when one wants to die. The independence of personal prayer required more imagination than I could access at the time. It is exhausting enough trying to keep oneself alive; to be expected to articulate love and hope and beauty—and more dangerously, lament—was like trying to float with weights hanging from my neck. Liturgy, I found, was a kind of rest. For the first time, my presence in a spiritual space didn't depend on my own articulation or imagination. I could rise and sit and kneel and speak or not speak in this sacred theater that others had written the script for. I could let others hold a sacred imagination for me.

To be clear, liturgy in no way saved me, nor was it even a remedy to my depression. But it was an anchor, something that kept me from drifting helplessly into my own interior current. Ritual, when coupled with beauty, makes for a very adequate mooring. It won't carry you to shore, but it will keep you close enough that hope can swim out to visit you regularly.

Years later, in the summer of 2020, I began a project called Black Liturgies. It was a season when many wondered if the world might be prepared to at last contend with the terror of whiteness armed against Black bodies. We witnessed brutal public executions. Elijah McClain was taken from us. Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. And then George Floyd, and non-Black people weren't as quick to look away (or so it seemed). For Black folk, nothing of this was new, of course. Before Breonna, there was Sandra Bland. Before Elijah, there was Tamir Rice. Before George, there was Eric Garner. But with the awakening of white attention came white opinion, and a white president who stoked racial divisions at the site of religious fault lines.

As people began to reveal their moral allegiances, many Black people experienced renewed gratitude for spiritual spaces capable of holding their grief and hope. Others looked around and realized we weren't as safe in church as we thought we were, as many white evangelical spaces revealed precisely who they've always been to queer people, disabled people, refugees, immigrants, Black people, and other people of color. The exodus from toxic religiosity became more urgent for many of us. Coupled with the isolation of the pandemic, the search for more honest and creative spiritual community was awakened in a new way.

The Sunday after George Floyd's murder was Pentecost Sunday. While still in the height of the pandemic, I logged into an Episcopal church service online and waited for some manner of belief to return to me. I lay in the same position I had been for days prior, a cluster of grapes and a bag of hot Cheetos on the pillow next to me. And I waited, knowing what I've always known: that there are days when it is particularly difficult to pray words written by a white man. For all its beauty, this liturgy that had given me words to pray when I had none was suffocating. Thomas Cranmer, who wrote the Book of Common Prayer at a time when my ancestors were being abducted, alienated from one another, and enslaved, would not be an anchor for me that day. He was incapable of speaking to my pain, Black grief, Black hope, in a voice I could trust. I wanted more.

And so I began Black Liturgies. Mostly out of rage. I cannot say how much of my rage was holy and how much was hatred, but I hope it contained more of the former. I was desperate for a liturgical space that

could center Black emotion, Black literature, and the Black body unapologetically. I began sharing poetry and prayers and quotations on social media. I thought the project would bring together a dozen or so of us who weren't in physical proximity to one another but maybe were craving the same thing—space to breathe. I watched the project quickly become a community of many more—people who love liturgy and people who had never even heard the word. Christians *and* people who had never set foot in a church. It is a space held together by the sacredness of Black words alone.

When I write, I try to be transparent in naming that I am writing out of a Christian formation. I've found meaning and beauty in the Christian story, and I honor that. However, I am equally transparent in naming that my spirituality cannot be reduced to this. I was not raised in an overtly religious home, but as I've gotten older, I've been able to decipher the discrete presence of spirituality that flows through my family—a spirituality grounded not in articulation of doctrine or creed, but in storytelling, myth, humor, and the Black body. And so, while some of these liturgies will speak to a Christian spiritual formation, others will speak to a Black spirituality, others to a queer spirituality, others a mythical spirituality. These are, of course, not mutually exclusive, but this is to say that if this book has loyalty to anything, it is to spiritual liberation in all its incarnations and complexities. Whatever spirituality calls to you from these liturgies, I hope it leaves you feeling more free. To believe or not believe. To feel what you feel. To be free in your body. And still, as the words of this book are tethered to me, an individual, I must warn of the limits in its diversity. There are places in you, I'm certain, I have failed to locate words for, corridors of the heart that I have not walked.

My hope is that an array of people will approach these pages, however suspiciously or cautiously. That they might serve as a harbor for those who have escaped the trauma of white Christian nationalism, religious homophobia and transphobia, biblical ableism, and ecclesial misogyny; those healing from spiritual spaces that were more violent than loving, more tyrannical than liberating.

The Greek origins of the word *liturgy* can be translated to “work of/for the people.” Most simply, it is a form for a sacred experience, often practiced in community and habitually. The ceremony of a Catholic or

Anglican rite are examples that often come to mind, but liturgy is far more universal than even these spiritual expressions. Throughout space and time, peoples have imagined and reimagined forms for communing with the divine or revering the sacred, be it an altar to the ancestors, the recitation of Mussaf on Shabbat, the Okuyi practiced by some Bantu groups, or the artistry of Tai Chi. Liturgy may contain prayer, but it is certainly not synonymous with it.

The liturgy that I've found healing in happens to be written liturgy. For me, reimagining written prayer outside of the white gaze has been a practice in both liberation and solidarity. Something striking happens when you are made to read words written in particularity, with a shared voice. All of a sudden you may come across a phrase or an emotion that doesn't immediately resonate with you. It may not be *for you*. But what does it mean to commit yourself to staying in the room—remaining in the words even if they don't immediately speak to you? Are you capable of decentering yourself long enough to hear the voice of another? Will you take up the words alongside them, never overpowering them but following in solidarity? And it is a practice in liberation, as I am brought home to my own interior world. There, I am liberated into emotion. Rested in my body. I am brought near to self, neighbor, ancestor, and the divine in a ritual that feels safe and honest.

I cannot promise you that this form of liturgy is your path, that it will feel like a homecoming for you, that it will restore your faith. The truth is that it is not for everyone. Still, receive this invitation. I do not need you to have the same experience with the sacred as I have, but I'm quite interested to see if you'll rise and come on the journey. It is not lost on me that I am asking you to trust me as an adequate guide, and I should tell you that most days I feel like I'm wandering. I am working on my sense of direction. But my promise to you is that every word in this book has been written, interrogated, and preserved with an imagination for collective healing, rest, and liberation. And any mystery within these pages certainly cannot be contained to them. These are only fragments of divine encounter, and I am proud of that. Turn them over in your hand. Take a deep breath.

Architecture

I'VE CONSTRUCTED this book in two parts. Part One, "By Story," is concerned with the existential—the shared questions and longings of the human experience. Grief, Delight, Remorse, Belief. How can we find a resting place in the disparate conditions of existence? And how is the spiritual enmeshed with these questions and longings? The letters and liturgies in this section can be approached with a kind of dailiness, but dependent on and in reflection of your circumstances or interior life. These can, of course, be read in both community and solitude—in whatever company the words appear most true. Some phrases move differently when you aren't glancing over your shoulder. Others can only be sustained with the arms of another holding you up.

Part Two, "By Time," is organized around the temporal—our relationship to the divine in respect to time. Be it the hours of the day or particular seasons or days of observance, this is where habit and cycle live in the book. What are the rhythms that hold together one's spiritual life? What are the celebrations and laments written into our years? There are liturgies for church holidays, for occasions such as Juneteenth, Mother's Day, Kwanzaa; as well as morning, midday, and evening prayer. Not all seasons or days given space in these pages will resonate or be observed by all. There are, for example, a number of sections grounded in a Christian liturgical calendar. There is a liturgy for a homegoing service, which is distinct from what others would consider a mere "funeral." Whatever the page, enter and depart as feels right and true for you and the community you practice within.

The book is held together by several core elements:

ANCESTORS—To encounter the spiritual absent from the dead, absent from the people who made us, is no longer a risk I am willing to take. Each section will include quotations or excerpts from Black ancestors. Some are

writers, artists, leaders of social movements. I cannot do this work without their guidance and instruction. We possess the privilege of time; with each generation, there is an increase in our access to the wisdom of those who came before us. It would be irresponsible of me to create a liturgical artifact without them. You'll also find quotes from the land of the living—people whose words I expect will stretch far into time.

LETTERS—Letter writing is a dying art, and I've been trying to resurrect it in my own relationships. It's a very humbling practice, especially by hand, as you don't have the same freedom in editing that you do in a text or an email. You hurriedly go to cross out a line, but the page will not soon forget the error. I am also, of course, confronted with my own penmanship, which can feel very cruel. I live with a few neurological conditions that have made fine motor movements difficult, and my handwriting now appears to me rippled and rugged and imprecise. Letters have been a reminder, however welcome or not, of my own mortality. And a puzzle of legibility at times, though for you I've typed them.

But in all, I've found that the pen changes when it's writing *to* someone as opposed to *for* someone. You aren't writing to prove a point, but to relay your inner world in the way you need to on that particular day. The next morning you might wake to find it not so big of a deal that you burned your dinner the night before. But the letter lives on, unapologetic in its drama.

And in a world where we are consistently force-fed narratives about our own indignity, about the everyday realities of the oppressed, about the unquestionable heroism of those in power, letter writing can be a form of resistance. Say your own thing and say the thing your way and say it without those who might destroy you peeking over your shoulder. Throughout history, we have sought ways to communicate unintimidated by the propaganda of an oppressive society. The letter is closer to the silent nod of two people passing by each other on a dimly lit sidewalk than it is to any dissertation. This is how we rally and decolonize and liberate our interior worlds. We hold on to one another, eye to eye, as we tell a truer story. It is preservation.

POETRY—The heart of the liturgist is near to the heart of the poet. In terms of the human experience, each is responsible not for teaching but for expressing—however inconclusive or raw that expression may be. But

liturgy is just nearly poetry, never quite. It lacks an intentional shape on the page, it lacks poetic structure, and it often becomes wordy where poetry is more economical. Perhaps liturgy is the verbose sister of the far more discriminating art. Neither need apologize for their distinct qualities. And there is something to be said for the fact that many spiritual writers throughout history have also been poets.

What does it mean to be formed by poetry? To adhere to the rhythm, to surrender to every line break, to be present to the sensory? The ancients understood what James Baldwin later asserted: “The poets (by which I mean all artists) are finally the only people who know the truth about us. Soldiers don’t. Statesmen don’t. Priests don’t. Union leaders don’t. Only poets.” And so, throughout these liturgies, I’ve tried to access the heart of a poet in me to convey a kind of truth. While I’ve written many of the poems you’ll encounter in this book, I should say the poet’s voice is distinct from the voice of the letter writer, which is definitively mine. In the poems, if there is an “I” present, you can rightfully assume it is not me. On the rare occasion I do appear, it is in fragments. What is critical is that you locate someone real in the words, preferably yourself. As Helen Vendler put it, “You don’t read or overhear the voice in the poem, you are the voice in the poem. You stand behind the words and speak them as your own.”

BREATHE—When I first began attending Episcopalian and Catholic services, I was stunned to discover what the liturgy required of my body. Standing, sitting, kneeling, bowing, gestures and postures, the smell of the incense, the bread, the wine. It was an incredibly sensory, corporeal engagement. And it connected me to the physical in ways I couldn’t anticipate. This was no disembodied, invisible, spiritual encounter; this ritual was living in the body. And it was not just about the power of the body, but the frailty. There were days when my limitations were inescapable. Could I endure the cold wood of the kneeler digging into my wobbly knees as I mumbled my confession? How much longer could I stand before my muscles began to twitch? Am I well enough to attend at all? Can I breathe the air and not be destroyed?

I’ve belonged to spiritual spaces that required I forget my body—my Black, woman, sick body—to survive. I want the liturgies of this book, and any spiritual encounter, to make me more whole, never dismembered. And

so I've included breath prayers with each liturgy, as a reminder and practice of that. Will we breathe together? Relax our shoulders, unclench our jaws? For the divine is just as present in our breath, in our flesh, as in our mental realm.

CONFESSION AND FORGIVENESS—Confession is a ritual that draws us toward the reflection and self-honesty that often escapes us in our daily lives. June Jordan wrote, “To tell the truth is to become beautiful, to begin to love yourself, value yourself. And that’s political, in its most profound way.” What does it mean to become a truth-teller, to encounter your own face and not look away? Who is saved by our admissions of guilt? Confession, as an anti-delusion practice, saves its utterer far more than the wounded. It is not repair, only its preface. But this does not make its honesty any less necessary.

Not every confession in this book is for everyone. On some topics, some of you don’t need a confession; you deserve an apology. And so, when you arrive at each confession section, it is my hope you will be able to discern when it’s appropriate to receive the confession as opposed to offering it.

Following each confession will always be a declaration of forgiveness. This I offer not with certainty; I’m not convinced I have the power to absolve anyone, especially if I am not the one who’s been wounded. But I include these declarations because self-forgiveness can be a deadly serious and necessary thing if we are to survive, if we are to reclaim interior rest. Have you offered apology? Have you made reparation? Are you becoming more human? Forgive yourself.

BENEDICTION—Traditionally spoken over congregations at the end of religious services, benedictions are final words of blessing as we depart from the liturgy. These benedictions can be read like a melding of both letter and prayer. I am praying to you and the divine at once. You might consider it a final declaration of imagination: the humanity I want for us. This is what I dream we carry with us as we close the book.

CONTEMPLATION—What does it mean to stay near to our interior worlds? To travel through those hidden corridors of the heart where we have hesitated to go? As we listen for the stories, emotions, loves, hungers, and dreams that reside in us, we liberate all that the world obscures from us. At the close of each liturgy in Part One, you will find several questions for

contemplation. The significance of each question lies not in its answer (there are no right, wrong, or static ones), but in the listening itself—a sacred attention.

LITURGIES FOR OCCASION—The second half of this book is organized by seasons or occasions, some following a Christian calendar. They can be encountered alone but are written with an imagination for being recited in community.

You'll notice that a call-and-response form is used, in accordance with a long line of liturgical rituals that predate us. This form tends to bring out new tensions and release in us. For example, some of us have only known our role as leader; it may be challenging to submit to belonging to the company of responders. Perhaps these liturgies can guide you into a kind of rest. You don't always have to set the tone, to decide, to steer. Or perhaps you have long been silenced or alienated in spiritual spaces. Is this an opportunity for your voice to be centered—not dismissed, but waited on, heeded? I hope. You deserve that much.

Some of the occasions in Part Two will apply to you, and others won't. A number of the liturgies are born of the Catholic Christian story. I name this only to warn that it may at times feel exclusive to a particular kind of reader. I've included a template for writing one's own liturgy at the end of the book, as a very small gesture to those of you who might like to write liturgies that feel closer to the occasions you experience.

Finally, you do not need my permission, but if it helps, this is a reminder that you have agency in how and what you encounter in this book. Pass over what doesn't feel right for you, remain where you need to remain. There is no order. There is no demand I will make of you, apart from staying near to yourself, your body, your own soul, and the stories that dwell there.

Part One

By Story

THE LITURGIES IN THIS SECTION ARE ORGANIZED BY THE SHARED QUESTIONS, LONGINGS, AND STORIES THAT MAKE US HUMAN. THEY CAN BE ENCOUNTERED NONSEQUENTIALLY AND READ BY AN INDIVIDUAL OR IN COMMUNITY.

DIGNITY

When God had made [the human], he made him out of stuff that sung all the time and glittered all over. Then after that some angels got jealous and chopped him into millions of pieces, but still he glittered and hummed. So they beat him down to nothing but sparks but each little spark had a shine and a song. So they covered each one over with mud. And the lonesomeness in the sparks make them hunt for one another.

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON

*I am so perfect so divine so ethereal so surreal
I cannot be comprehended
except by my permission*

—NIKKI GIOVANNI

LETTER I | TO THOSE WITH HEADS BOWED TOO LONG

I'm writing this first letter from bed. I lie here on my left side, peeking my right hand from underneath the empty duvet to type. It is not practical, but it is necessary because I'm in pain again and depressed again, and this is all I have to give today.

I've waited months to begin, far too many to admit to my editor now. I wanted upright Cole to write this book—upright and at the eighteenth-century oak desk I bought to make me feel big, like a real writer. Instead, I write this book of liturgies under sheets stained from last night's pumpkin curry. Beside me is a nightstand covered in medications, half-drunk mugs of tea, and a littering of elaborate skincare I haven't touched in weeks. I don't feel very big today.

But just now, the man I try to love creaks the door open—slowly, carefully. He perches at the far end of the bed, without speaking, giving me