

**Introduction for
Angela Dillard, “‘True or False Religion’:
How Faith Mattered In Detroit’s Radical History”
Defining Detroit event
April 12, 2007**

Here’s a “coming full circle” story:

As a potential speaker in our “Defining Detroit” series here at Marygrove College, Dr. Angela Dillard has been on my mind--and on my list of prospects--for quite a while....ever since I first became aware of her doctoral dissertation which she completed at the University of Michigan in 1995.

Since the mid-1990s, professor Dillard has been a pretty busy young woman as she’s made her way in the halls of academia:

Teaching at the University of Minnesota, then nine years at New York University, and recently joining the University of Michigan as an associate professor with the Center for Afroamerican and African Studies;

Authoring a book and numerous book reviews and articles relating to American and African-American intellectual history;

and appearing on radio and television programs (including on PBS’ “The News Hour with Jim Lehrer” in 200_)

You can imagine how happy I was to discover just this past November that she was now at the University of Michigan and the book (*Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit*) based on her dissertation is coming out this spring from U of M Press.

Btw, the book should be out in a few weeks; see Flyer from U of M press that gives you 20% discount if you want to purchase the book directly from them.

I think I know what you most want to know: what does “True vs. False Religion”--the main title of Professor Dillard’s talk--mean? It’s also the main title of the second chapter of her new book. In a couple minutes we’ll bring her up to the podium and she can explain it to you.

For now, though, I’d like to say a few things about her book, particularly about “space”:

The center of gravity of *Faith in the City* is the radical or progressive movement in Detroit from the 1930s through the 1960s.

In Detroit, it’s a movement that combined the struggle for the rights of workers (the labor movement) and the rights of African-Americans (the civil rights movement)

While Dillard notes the numerous differences between the era of the Old Left (one that revolved around the CIO and the American Communist Party) and the New Left (one that featured a vibrant Black nationalist movement)--her main stress is on the overall continuity in the radical tradition in Detroit.

One way she does this is by examining intergenerational linkages between tactics, organizations, and personalities of the Old and New Lefts...hence, the justification in studying the biographies of Rev. Hill and Rev. Cleage...the preachers whom Dillard uses to understand each era.

But Dillard has a more direct reason for her attention to Hill, Cleage, and religion in general: for her, “religion has been a crucial factor in the cultures of opposition that make collective action possible.” (p. 11)

In other words, Religion Matters in political and social struggles for rights, freedom, and justice.

We all know about the critical role played by Black Churches in sustaining African Americans over the generations--during the years of slavery, Jim Crow, and the modern freedom struggles, both South and (Dillard stresses) North.

Dillard's particular contribution is showing how Black Churches (as religion, as a language, as a physical/moral/political space) in Detroit also sustained progressive causes from the 1930s through the 1960s

Black Churches so inclined drew in white labor and civil rights activists

In “bridging the secular and the sacred,” she says, such Churches also drew in people (former Mayor Coleman Young comes to mind) who were not particularly “religious” in their outlook, but found in the Churches of Rev. Hill, Rev. Cleage, and others emotional, intellectual, and political support for the long hard road ahead.

The religious institutions of African Americans, argues Dillard, have also been “contested spaces”--

During the 1930s, except for Hill's Hartford Avenue Baptist, Horace White's Plymouth Congregational, Malcolm Dade's St. Cyprian's Episcopal and perhaps a few others....Black ministers steadfastly closed the doors of their churches to representatives of organized labor.

When even the leader of the Pullman Porter's Union, A. Philip Randolph, was shut out, an angry Horace White asked (in a 1938 article in Christian Century), “WHO OWNS THE NEGRO CHURCH?”

The answer, for Rev. White, was the anti-union manufacturers of Detroit, particularly Ford.

While Detroit's “open shop” despotism dissolved in 1937-41, thus making Detroit a “union town,” the contested nature of the Black Church remained.

In the McCarthyite 1950s, Rev. Hill bravely-- defiantly-- opened Hartford's doors to Paul Robeson.

On the other hand, in 1964, Rev. Hill used his clout among the city's Baptist ministers to close doors on the Black nationalist Freedom Now Party (Rev. Cleage = candidate for Governor)....

Hill, of course, was denounced by younger radicals of the new generation as a "Tom"

For his part, Hill stressed "God's Power, not Black Power," saying that "there are white people suffering and dying for civil rights, too."

A final “Coming Full Circle” story:

Until recently, I was not aware that Angela Dillard’s family had roots in Black Detroit’s “Old West Side,” were early members of Hartford Ave. Baptist Church during the 1920s, and hung close with the family of Rev. Hill

I didn’t know that she, herself, was raised in the Hartford Church

I didn’t know about her parents’ activist commitments--that her mother Marilyn, for example, was the first secretary for the Trade Union Leadership Council (TULC), formed in the 1950s to fight to the interests of Blacks in the labor movement.

I didn’t know that she grew up with “old” stories of radicals and activists

And I didn’t know that she grew up in this neighborhood, attended the Catholic Immaculata high school, and as an aspiring artist seeking greater challenges, managed to take art classes at Marygrove College:

“It showed me another world, a whole other existence in which people lounged in comfy chairs, drank coffee and talked about books and ideas.”

Marygrove was also something of a sanctuary for Angela:

“I also remember a period of weeks that I used the grounds [at Marygrove] to escape from a very large young girl who for reasons I don’t recall wanted to do me bodily harm.”

“In both ways, Marygrove helped to save my life.”

Well, Angela, we’re glad...and we welcome you back to Marygrove College!!!