

Studying while black

By [Drew G. I. Hart](#)

September 25, 2014

I have good news! If any of you follow me on Twitter then you should already know what it is. I now have officially entered ABD status in my PhD program. I have finished my 2 years of residency and course work, along with my comprehensive exams and my oral exam defending my comps before my committee. Thankful to be at this next stage, getting prepared to begin writing my dissertation. And yet, if I am honest, this whole process has been quite the journey.

I have often been unsure about my decision to pursue a PhD in theology. Are there more practical on the ground paths that I should be taking? And things only got more complicated rather than less this summer when I was studying for my comps. I practically lived under a rock with my books, prepping for my four exams. Meanwhile, protests against the executions of unarmed black men were at an acutely raised level, especially in light of the ridiculous white supremacist responses seen in Ferguson. Where was Drew, at some coffee shop reading and taking notes. Never did I feel as torn about my current obligations as I did then. Am I using my gifts and my body in a faithful manner, given my abilities? To be honest, one of the most encouraging things I had to hold on to was when I remembered the words of James Cone as he accounted for his own struggles back when he was in graduate school:

However, my most difficult problem in graduate school was not learning how to write but rather learning how to stay in school during the peak of the civil rights movement. How could I write papers about the Barth-Brunner debates on natural theology while black people were being denied the right to vote? Many of my black classmates, including my brother, were deeply engaged in the civil rights struggle. Some blacks asked me how I could stay in the library, reading ancient documents about Nicaea and Chalcedon, while blacks were fighting for freedom in the streets. These were tough questions. While I am confident now that I made an appropriate decision for my vocational commitment, I was not certain at the time that I made the right decision. All I knew then was that I had an intellectual craving to do theology and to relate it to black people's struggle for justice. (My Soul Looks Back, 36)