A year earlier, Neal published his first book, “Common Ground: A Comparison of the Ideas of Consciousness in the Writings of Howard Thurman and Huey Newton” (Africa World Press), the groundwork for his investigation into the freedom struggle. In this piece, he began to develop concepts such as the necessity of rejection and the freedom aesthetic.

“African Freedom Aesthetic” serves as a descriptive function for a particular metaphilosophical framework and cultural memory which has shaped the consciousness of a group of people—namely African Americans—and was born of a desire for freedom,” Neal said.

“I centered the conversation around the concept of consciousness in order to demonstrate how two figures from the modern era approach the concept philosophically,” Neal said, referring to Thurman and Newton. “This book certainly foreshadowed my current work.”

In 2019, Neal published “Howard Thurman’s Philosophical Mysticism: Love against Fragmentation” (Lexington Press).

“In many ways, it is volume two of the first book in that I sought to bring clarity to a few issues. First, I wanted to distinguish African American philosophy from the philosophy of race, or just a black person doing philosophy. Next, I wanted to bring to the forefront why I take Thurman to be a philosopher and to provide a framework so that anyone now can see that his approach was certainly philosophical,” Neal said.

“I have always been very interested in social movements, particularly how they begin, what sustains them and why they dissipate,” he explained. “My interest in this topic stems from being around so many of my parents’ friends who claimed to have been a part of ‘The Movement’ when they were younger.”

“I remember asking my dad about this—do they mean the Civil Rights Movement, the Vietnam protests, or just some random localized movement? He told me that for black people in America, there has only been one movement: ‘The Freedom Movement.’”

Neal said his father explained all other movements were “just a moment in an ongoing movement.”

Neal said his current work is “the most significant work while also inspiring me to continue on this journey,” Neal said. Past inductees include Wallace Best, a professor of religion at Princeton University; Jeffrey Q. McCune Jr., an associate professor of women, gender and sexuality studies as well as African and African-American studies at Washington University; and Mary Elizabeth Moore, a professor and dean at Boston University School of Theology.

A member of the American Philosophical Association, Neal serves on the Committee on the Status of Blacks in Philosophy as well as the Committee for the Status and Future of the Discipline. The APA is the oldest professional academic organization in the U.S. and promotes the discipline and profession of philosophy both within academia and the public arena.

Neal is the former president and vice president of the Mississippi Philosophical Association. He holds an Associate of Applied Science degree from the former State Technical Institute at Memphis, a Bachelor of Arts degree in religion from Mississippi College, and a Master of Divinity in philosophical theology from Mercer University in Georgia. He also earned a doctorate in humanistic inquiry with an emphasis in African American philosophy and religion from Clark Atlanta University.

“When I came to Mississippi State there was no one doing African American philosophy, and to be more specific, there was no one who was focused on uncovering the meaning of blackness as understood by black people engaged in the struggle for freedom,” Neal said. “This vacuum has forced me to constantly re-tune what I think are the definitions, frameworks and distinctions that differentiate the meaning put forward in a constant search for coherence and clarity, but most of all, adequacy.”

By Sarah Nicholas