

ROSS, SABRINA N., Ph.D. Exploring Critical, Embodied, Emancipatory Education through Deconstructions and Reconstructions of Womanist and Black Religious Discourses: A Social Justice Framework. (2007)  
Directed by Dr. Glenn Hudak. 294 pp.

This study is a conceptual project which explores ways in which U. S. black epistemologies can provide new understandings of oppression and new strategies for transcending hierarchical relationships of power and domination. Specific epistemologies developed by enslaved Africans in the U. S. and their descendents have enabled U. S. black Americans to navigate the paradoxes and contradictions of living under conditions of oppression in a society founded on freedom and equality. It is hypothesized that these U. S. black epistemologies, which make sense of and provide strategies for managing existential feelings of alienation, displacement, and despair that accompany experiences of oppression, can be useful for the majority of people in our society who, due to the postmodern condition, are now experiencing similar existential feelings.

The U. S. black epistemology chosen for this exploration is black theology. It is believed that this discipline's struggles to deal with issues of oppression, within-group heterogeneity, the complex role of Christianity in black liberation, and issues of appropriation and authenticity provide a microcosm of issues facing black Americans in the U. S. The context and history of the development of black theology is provided followed by a deconstructive analysis of contemporary black theological discourse. Finally, a re-articulated black theology is constructed out of liberatory black theological discourse, the Korean concept of Han (i.e. the psychological woundedness of victims of oppression), feminist theology, and selective, critical appropriations of prevailing theories

of power and knowledge. This project ends with a discussion of the pedagogical nature of the present study. Ways in which this re-articulated black theological vision connects with critical pedagogy and social justice are explicated.

EXPLORING CRITICAL, EMBODIED, EMANCIPATORY EDUCATION THROUGH  
DECONSTRUCTIONS AND RECONSTRUCTIONS OF WOMANIST AND BLACK  
RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES: A SOCIAL JUSTICE FRAMEWORK

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro  
2007

Approved by

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To my son, Shawn Ross Griffin, who continues to amaze and inspire me.

To my husband, Kevin Griffin, without whose hard work, and financial and emotional support, I would not have finished this dissertation.

APPROVAL PAGE

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very fortunate to have on my dissertation committee four individuals whose considerable scholarly talents are only matched by the level of support and encouragement they have shown me during this process. Special thanks to my dissertation advisor, Glenn Hudak for encouraging my love of philosophy, enthusiastically supporting my progress, and for being my advocate in so many ways. My understanding of the value of critical pedagogy as a tool for transforming the world is due to H. Svi Shapiro, whose advice, assistance, and encouragement I deeply appreciate. Leila Villaverde is a mentor without equal; I am grateful for her advice, expertise, and many contributions to my intellectual and professional development. Finally, I thank Bennett Ramsey for introducing me to the concept of Han, which inspired this project and for pushing me to discover what I needed to say about oppression, black theology, and social justice; through this process, I finally have.

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## PREFACE

Increasing attention is now being paid to postmodern understandings of truth. Along with these understandings comes recognition that rigid conceptualizations of oppression inadequately capture the often complicated ways individuals can participate in and also be penalized by systems of domination. Recognition that individuals are, to varying degrees, complicit in the systems of power that influence their lives also increases the difficulty of identifying genuinely oppressed groups and subsequently makes it much more difficult to outline plans of action for transcending systematic oppression. In spite of these acknowledged difficulties, the purpose of this project is to articulate a thought experiment<sup>1</sup> about possibilities for transcending systems of oppression through the use of various forms of subjugated and oppositional knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

My understanding of oppression and strategies for transcending it are derived from my lived experiences of navigating multiple and competing identities of privilege and marginalization. In order to make transparent the positionality from which I initiate this project, I feel it necessary to situate myself within my work. As a highly educated U. S. black woman who believes in God, there is a constant navigation of paradoxes that informs my subjectivity and frames my understanding of the world. As a black American living in the U. S., I embody the glaring contradictions of a society founded ideologically

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<sup>1</sup> I am borrowing the phrase utilized by Sallie McFague (1982) in her book *Metaphorical Theology*.

<sup>2</sup> Here, I am using Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) concept of subjugated knowledge which differs from the concept suggested by Foucault in that it is comprised of fully developed, rather than naïve knowledge forms. I also utilize Collins' (2000) concept of oppositional knowledge, understood as a specific type of subjugated knowledge that is aimed at resisting oppression.

on notions of freedom and equality yet made economically prosperous through the forced labor of enslaved Africans. As one who identifies (albeit tenuously) with the Christian faith, my awareness of the historical uses of Christianity as a tool of oppression for black people leaves me doubtful of its liberating potential. Yet, own experiences of degrees of liberation within black Christian churches and my respect for the majority of black Americans who claim the Christian faith as liberating (Cone, 1975; Wimbush, 1991, 1993), make me reluctant to completely denounce Christianity. Finally, I embody the contradictions of one who identifies with the masses of oppressed U. S. black Americans, yet whose education in predominantly white institutions of higher learning serves as a potential site for the indoctrination of Eurocentric values and practices (Shujaa, 1994) that have historically been used to keep the masses of black Americans (as well as other marginalized groups) oppressed. I live the daily tensions, manifested through each of these instances, of being an outsider within (Collins, 2000) these various sites of power.

While tensions necessarily exist between these identities, they make me who I am. My struggles against oppression are waged within the intersections of these competing identities. Theologian Renee' Hill (1999) highlights the tensions and contradictions of embodying multiple and competing identities involved in resisting oppression when she writes: "I live at the intersection of many rebellions, resistances, and struggles for liberation . . . My life is lived fully only in the intersections, in-between places, and borderlands of identities" (p. 138). It is these 'borderlands of identity,' these places of being an outsider-within, that inform my understandings of oppression.

I realize, however, that being an outsider within various locations of power renders me susceptible to internalizing the same oppressive themes and practices that I seek to dismantle. I am therefore, always mindful of Audre Lorde's (1984) statement: ". . . the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (p. 112).

My goal is to explore the conceptual possibilities for re-envisioning understandings of oppression that will dismantle hierarchical relationships of domination and bring about social justice. Yet the conceptual tools that I have at my disposal are, arguably, tools of oppression. I cannot ignore the historical contribution of Eurocentric and academic ways of knowing (i.e. the master's tools) to the diminishment, perceived inferiority (Ramsey, 1996; West, 1982), and oppression (Shujaa, 1994) of others, especially members of marginalized groups. Yet, my education in predominantly white institutions has provided me with ways of knowing that help me to think about and articulate my oppression in ways that I was previously unable to. One goal of this thought project is then, to explore possibilities of refuting Lorde's (1984) statement. At question is whether Eurocentric, patriarchal, and oppressive conceptual tools can be selectively appropriated in ways that are empowering and liberatory or whether the very utilization of such tools carries inescapable traces of domination.

Admittedly, it seems the height of arrogance to attempt a thought project of social justice given the limitations I have articulated. Such authorial positionality is inescapable, and yet my concern for issues of social justice necessitates that I articulate my truths

despite my subjectivity. The following passage by James Cone frames this dilemma brilliantly. He writes:

There is no place we can stand that will remove us from the limitations of history and thus enable us to tell the whole truth without risk of ideological distortion. As long as we live and have our being in time and space, absolute truth is impossible. But this concession is not an affirmation of unrestricted relativity. We can and must say something about the world that is not reducible to our own subjectivity. (Cone, 1975, p. 102)

While this project represents a personal effort to come to terms with those in-between places of identity—those simultaneous places of oppression and liberation—it is at the same time a social justice project that seeks to determine whether those in-between places of identity can foster social transformation. My task is then, to say something about our global world that honors and at the same time transcends my subjectivity—to speak the truths I believe about oppression in ways that are suggestive of liberation for all marginalized groups and for those participating in the oppression of others.

I was inspired to initiate this thought experiment after reading Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. In that book, Collins argues that U. S. black women's simultaneous experiences of racial and gender oppression provide a unique vantage point from which to understand and resist oppression. Collins further argues that U. S. black women's epistemologies can engage in dialogue with other subjugated ways of knowing to realize social justice for everyone. I discovered in Collins' work possibilities for utilizing my

own outsider-within identities to understand and transcend systems of oppression through dialogue with other outsider-within groups.

While Collins' analysis focused on the subjugated and oppositional knowledge of U. S. black women, my focus is on the subjugated and oppositional knowledge of U. S. black people, in general, whose historical experiences of displacement, radical otherness, and despair can provide the masses now suffering the effects of the postmodern condition<sup>3</sup> (hooks, 1993a; West, 1993b) with strategies for resistance.

A study of the entirety of black thought would be prohibitive. Instead, this project focuses on a particular form of black religious thought (i.e. black theology) for several reasons. First, because the majority of U. S. black Americans are Christian (Pinn, 2002), black religious thought, perhaps better than any other form of black thought, can capture the impulses and aspirations of most U. S. black people. Second, black theology—a specific type of black religious thought—is a public theology (Hopkins, 1999; Thomas, 2004) which speaks to the relationship between God and black humanity in ways that are sensitive to the lived experiences of black Americans and those they share the world with. Finally, because black theology developed as an academic discipline, it embodies the tensions associated with several significant outsider-within locations: black theologians in Eurocentric institutions of higher education, black Christians within a

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<sup>3</sup> West (1993b) argues that blacks in the U. S. have historically embodied postmodern themes of degraded otherness and marginality. hooks (1993) argues that the collective experience of black people, prior to the advent of postmodernism included displacement, profound alienation, and despair; she also argues that one result of postmodernism has been that many other groups now share with black people the loss of a sense of grounding, alienation, and despair that historically defined the black experience for many black people.

historically racist and patriarchal faith, and U. S. black Americans within a racist and patriarchal society.

By navigating lived experiences of oppression within their religion, academic institutions, and society, I hypothesize that U. S. black American theologians are provided a unique vantage point from which to understand and resist oppression. Yet such a vantage point is partial (Collins, 2000) and susceptible to internalized oppression (Lorde, 1984). Therefore, the black theological discourse to be utilized for this project will be analyzed critically for liberatory as well as oppressive content. The problem of oppression is bigger than anyone one discourse. This project, then, seeks to incorporate into those liberatory themes of black theology, a broad range of subjugated knowledge derived from racial, theological, philosophical, feminist, and educational discourses in an attempt to articulate a more accurate understanding of oppression and of the pedagogical processes necessary to overcome it.

The purpose of Chapter I, then, is to outline the theoretical underpinnings I have used to articulate my specific understandings of the world, of power, oppression, and resistance. Chapter II is an attempt to begin at the beginning, with an abbreviated history of the socio-historical context within which black theology developed. Chapter III analyzes contemporary black theological articulations for their liberatory content. Chapter IV is an exercise in fragments—an attempt to liberate from their oppressive meta-narratives, those themes of black theological discourse that are found to be relevant and useful for this project. Chapter IV concludes with suggestions for a re-articulated vision of black theology based on various black theological, philosophical, and feminist

fragments. The final chapter of this book situates the libratory black theological discourse of this project within an explicitly educational framework; correspondence between the theological discourse utilized in this project and the discourse of critical, libratory education will be emphasized.



## CHAPTER I

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### Michel Foucault on Power/Knowledge

Any project attempting to elucidate issues of power, knowledge, and resistance would be remiss if it failed to consider the contributions of French philosopher Michel Foucault to these understandings. Positioning his writings in response to the presumed universal and totalizing influence of the Enlightenment on modernity, Foucault's work has routinely been credited with articulating the particularity, situatedness, and fragmented characteristics of the postmodern condition (Hartsock, 1990; Natoli & Hutcheon, 1993; West, 1993b).

Foucault explored changes in practices, ways of knowing, and institutions that were the impetus for the construction of modern European society (Armstrong, 2006). He problematized relationships between knowledge, structures of power, and resistance to power in his historical analyses of prisons, mental institutions and sexuality, which critiqued political and epistemological foundations and notions of the sovereign subject (Gutting, 2005; Hopkins, 1997; Rouse, 2005). Foucault's writings are routinely organized as early, middle, and later periods, ranging from the 1965 publication of *Madness and Civilization* to the 1988 *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3* (Hopkins, 1997; Sawicki, 2005).

Foucault's subject matter was diverse; he examined the historical reconstructions of knowledge in scientific fields such as medicine and psychiatry, ways in which reconfigurations of knowledge make new forms of power and domination possible, as well as possibilities for subjectivity and freedom within systems of power (Hopkins, 1997; Rouse, 2005). For the purposes of this chapter, Foucault's explication of concepts of power, knowledge, and resistance will primarily be derived from his 1980 book *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings 1972-1977*. Before proceeding to the discussion of Power/Knowledge, however, it is necessary to situate this text within the larger framework of Foucault's work.<sup>4</sup>

In his writings about the history of knowledge in specific fields of science, Foucault focused on 'historically situated fields of knowledge' (Rouse, 2005) or discursive formations that regulated what information could be counted as truth. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault analyzed reconfigurations of discursive formations in modern society which through practices of various techniques of power (i.e. discipline, surveillance, and constraint), afforded the dominant group new possibilities of knowledge about human beings (e.g. changes in work environments that allowed individuals to be more easily managed, medical examinations and documentation to reveal and control human behavior) and new ways to expand control of humans into the social realm (Hopkins, 1997; Rouse, 2005).

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter makes no attempt to create an overarching schema within which to understand Foucault's work; it is recognized that Foucault, in rejection of the totalizing systems of modernity he sought to debunk, intended his works to be fragmentary and particular (Rouse, 2005). For ease of discussion, however, recurring themes between Foucault's historical, archaeological works and his genealogical work on social relations of power will be addressed.

In pre-modern civilization, Foucault argued that centralized power was wielded by a sovereign authority through the use of violence and other forms of repression (Armstrong, 2006; Rouse, 2005). Emergent fields during modernity associated with population growth and care created new productive techniques of power (i.e. disciplinary and regulatory), new discursive formations that interacted with disciplinary and regulatory power to construct normative ways of knowing, and newly subjected individuals (Armstrong, 2006; Rouse, 2005; Sawicki, 2005). In this way, power became not just a top-down reality, but a reality which circulated throughout the social world and was simultaneously experienced within the body of the individual. Foucault writes:

But in thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. (Foucault, 1980, p. 39)

As opposed to coercive or destructive uses of power which merely represses the individual, disciplinary power is productive in its ability to construct new habits, new ways of knowing, and as mentioned earlier, new individuals (Foucault, 1980; Rouse, 2005). Foucault speaks of the effects of these new technologies of power in the production of docile bodies below:

The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it...It defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practiced bodies, "docile" bodies. (Foucault, as cited in Rouse, 2005, p. 98)

Along with these new technologies of power came ever-increasing abilities to gain knowledge about the individuals being disciplined, trained, placed under surveillance, or otherwise documented; increases in the mechanisms of power brought about concomitant increases in knowledge about the individuals through whom power circulated. These productive mechanisms of power—the ability of disciplinary power to subjugate individuals and construct their identities is significant. Of this complex manifestation of power, Foucault writes:

. . . power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression, in the manner of a great Superego, exercising itself only in a negative way. If, on the contrary, power is strong this is because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire—and also at the level of knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it. (1980, p. 59)

Hence, Foucault's (1980) concept of power/knowledge, which suggests the positive co-dependent relationship between knowledge and power, is expressed in the following passage:

Knowledge and power are integrated with one another, and there is no point in dreaming of a time when knowledge will cease to depend on power; this is just a way of reviving humanism in a utopian guise. It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power. (p. 52)

Although knowledge and power work together to extend control over individuals, power/knowledge can also be resisted. The exercise of disciplinary power is fluid and bi-directional. Thus, the 'docile' bodies subjected to systems of power are also capable of

exercising power themselves. Discussing the productive aspects of disciplinary power which render individuals virtual power conduits, Foucault (1980) writes:

In reality, power in its exercise goes much further, passes through much finer channels, and is much more ambiguous, since each individual has at his disposal a certain power, and for that very reason can also act as the vehicle for transmitting a wider power. (p. 72)

The ability of individuals who experience power as domination to also wield power necessitates for Foucault, an advancement over traditional analyses of power that present power as a merely repressive force possessed by the dominant class (Armstrong, 2006). Foucault argues that binary understandings of dominant and subjugated groups distort the fluidity and shared nature of disciplinary power. For Foucault, the oppressor/oppressed binary is not a binary at all; below he describes relations of power that are shared by everyone in society.

He writes:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a community or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application. (Foucault, 1980, p. 98)

Stated differently, Foucault understands power as a force that works through individuals, not as a weapon targeted at individuals. Thus, relations of power are dynamic and complex; individuals who experience themselves as subjugated through power relations

also are able to resist their subjugation through their own exercise of power. These relations of power legitimate specific forms of knowledge that simultaneously reproduce power while also creating spaces for its resistance (Sawicki, 2005). Foucault's emphasis on the individual's ability to resist disciplinary power is significant. He emphasizes the possibilities for resistance occurring at the level where power is experienced in the following passage:

. . . there are no relations of power without resistances; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised; resistance to power does not have to come from elsewhere to be real, nor is it inexorably frustrated through being the compatriot of power. It exists all the more by being in the same place as power; hence, like power, resistance is multiple and can be integrated in global strategies. (Foucault, 1980, p. 142)

That Foucault seems to suggest localized resistances to subjugation can be incorporated into global strategies appears promising for the current project. Additionally, Foucault's theory of power is useful in conceptualizing the nuances of power relationships between dominant and subjugated groups whereby those who are subjugated are understood as having the agency to resist domination. Rather than simply explicating the means through which dominant groups gained power historically, Foucault's analyses suggests the means through which subjugated groups can resist domination and exploitation. Yet the implications of Foucault's analyses also are problematic for this project. In particular, Foucault's refusal to epistemologically ground his analyses and his denial of a sovereign subject run counter to the libratory aims of this project and therefore ultimately limit the applicability of Foucault's analyses for this

project. The limitations of Foucault's work, relevant to this project, will now be discussed.

For Foucault, the exercise of power allowed certain discursive formations to be legitimated as truth while other knowledge forms were marginalized or silenced. Thus Foucault's concept of power/knowledge could also be reinterpreted as power/knowledge/truth, wherein understandings of what constitutes truth were merely manifestations of disciplinary or regulatory power. Relevant to the construction of truth through relations of power, Foucault (1980) writes:

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. This is the case for every society . . . I would say that we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function; we must speak the truth; we are constrained or condemned to confess or to discover the truth. Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth; it institutionalizes, professionalizes and rewards its pursuit. (p. 93)

Truth, therefore, is not external to relations of power. There is no standpoint outside of relations of power from which one can legitimate any given truth-claim over another. In fact, to attempt to invoke such a privileged epistemological stance (i.e. epistemological sovereignty) indicates an aspiration of power<sup>5</sup>—a desire to suppress

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<sup>5</sup> According to Rouse (2005), Foucault's analyses critiqued the notion of social contract expressed in Hobbes' Leviathan and its legitimization of sovereign monarchical power; for the same reasons that Foucault rejected the notion of sovereign power, his intermingling of power and knowledge also necessitates a rejection of epistemological sovereignty. Stated differently, Foucault argued that both power and truth are historically situated within specific contexts of struggle and cannot transcend those particularized spaces of contestation; appeals to transcendent rights of power or knowledge are, according to Foucault, are simply disguised manifestations of power.

other truth-claims and their ‘knowing subjects’—that Foucault viewed as “one of the chief dangers confronting us” as a civilization (Rouse, 2005, p. 107).

In the following passage, Foucault (1980) makes clear his disbelief in the epistemological sovereignty of Truth. He states:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. (Foucault, 1980, p. 131)

Foucault’s coupling of power/knowledge precludes the possibility of liberating knowledge (i.e. knowledge capable of transcending systems of domination). Because knowledge and power reinforce one another, there is no possibility that increased, more critical, or ‘better’ knowledge can emancipate individuals from systems of power and contestation (Hartsock, 1990). Each individual, whether dominant or subjugated, is intractably implicated within systems of power. Discussing the inescapability of involvement in relations of power Foucault (1980) writes:

It seems to me that power is ‘always already there’, that one is never ‘outside’ it, that there are no ‘margins’ for those who break with the system to gambol in. But this does not entail the necessity of accepting an inescapable form of domination or an absolute privilege on the side of the law. To say that one can never be ‘outside’ power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what. (p. 142)

Here Foucault clearly allows for resistance to power, but such resistance can only expose and ameliorate systems of power—it cannot transcend systems of power



(Armstrong, 2006; Hartsock, 1990; Sawicki, 2005). Yet such a formulation begs the question of the utility of analyses which can expose relationships of domination, but fails to provide the means of escaping them. Foucault presents an analysis of individuals who are trapped in a perpetual cycle of contestation and resistance with no hope of escape. Foucault's is a pessimistic view of humanity to say the least. Others have discussed the decidedly pessimistic nature of Foucault's work in terms of the limited agency attributed to individuals within systems of domination<sup>6</sup> and the lack of impetus for struggle against domination.<sup>7</sup>

Although these critiques have been thoroughly explicated elsewhere (see footnotes six and seven), they will be presented again here in a slightly modified format to address issues of applicability between Foucault's work on power/knowledge and the emancipatory goals of this project. The format of these critiques follows three questions: who is it that resists techniques of power, how do subjugated bodies resist disciplinary and regulatory powers, and why should subjugated bodies resist these mechanisms of power?

### ***Who Resists?***

For Foucault, the individual lacks an identity that exists prior to relations of power; social practices are understood and identities are constructed only within the context of discursive practices (Foucault, 1980). Foucault makes this point clear in the following passage:

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Linda Alcoff's (1990) "Feminist Politics and Foucault: The Limits to a Collaboration."

<sup>7</sup> See for example Charles Taylor's (1986) *Foucault on Freedom and Truth* (pp. 69-102), in David C. Hoy's (Ed.), *Foucault: A Critical Reader*.

. . . it's my hypothesis that the individual is not a pre-given entity which is seized on by the exercise of power. The individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces. (1980, p. 74)

Referring to Foucault's suggestion that there is no subjectivity outside of power relations, Hartsock (1990) questions possibilities of resisting disciplinary power when these mechanisms reach into the capillaries of individual bodies and create the individual's sense of self. Given such a scenario she rightfully asks *who* it is that does the resisting (Hartsock, 1990).

Foucault presents disciplinary power as ubiquitous (Armstrong, 2006). It circulates through the body and the mind producing an altered psychological state which creates specific types of internalized regulation and self-awareness (Rouse, 2005). Through disciplinary power, individuals are 'normalized' into categories (i.e. sane or insane, criminal or citizen, heterosexual or homosexual, etc.) that limit their range of subjective possibilities and influence their behaviors in ways that facilitate self-regulation (Armstrong, 2006; Sawicki, 2005). Thus, in Foucault's analysis, individuals are reconstructed as docile objects of power—individuals whose identities don't exist outside the relations of power through which they are constructed (Armstrong, 2006; Hartsock, 1990; Sawicki, 2005). Foucault (1980) writes:

The individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus, a primitive atom, a multiple and inert material on which power comes to fasten or against which it happens to strike, and in so doing subdues or crushes individuals. In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that *certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals*. The individual, that is, not a vis-à-vis of power; it is, I believe, one of its prime effects. The individual is an effect of power, and at the same time, or

precisely to the extent to which it is that effect, it is the element of its articulation. *The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle.* (1980, p. 98) (emphasis mine)

Clearly, subjectivity is created within relations of power. Thus, Hartsock's question of who it is that actually resists techniques of power is significant. Foucault had very specific reasons for developing his analysis without the presupposition of a transcendent subject (Rouse, 2005). His critique of modernity did not require a foundational subject to be legitimate (Rouse, 2005; Sawicki, 2005), but suspicion surrounding his lack of an a priori subject seems warranted for oppressed groups in particular. As self-identified members of marginalized groups have noted, it is indeed suspicious that while many subjugated groups are now finding their voices and asserting their subjectivity, the postmodern enterprise of problematizing subjectivity continually gains ground (hooks, 1993a; Hartsock, 1990; West, 1993b). Nancy Hartsock clarifies this issue in the following passage:

Somehow it seems highly suspicious that it is at the precise moment when so many groups have been engaged in "nationalisms" which involve redefinitions of the marginalized Others that suspicions emerge about the nature of the "subject," about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical "progress." Why is it that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be theorized. Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect. (1990, p. 164)

Regardless of Foucault's reasons or legitimacy in critiquing notions of a foundational subject who exists outside relations of power, this project—which seeks to articulate an essential humanness that is diminished but not destroyed through relations of domination—requires conceptualization of individual subjectivity capable of transcending systems of domination. For that to occur, a foundational subject is necessary.

***How Does Resistance to Relations of Power Occur?***

Although Foucault contends that resistance to power is implicit in his analysis, critics have questioned the practicality of such resistance, given the inescapable influence of disciplinary power on individual thought and actions. In his later works, Foucault addresses issues of autonomy and freedom within the constraints of systems of power (Armstrong, 2006). In doing so, he provides a fuller account of the processes through which individuals can resist subjugation. He called such exercises of freedom 'ethics'; these acts consist of pursuing freedom through self-reconstruction—by utilizing skills and techniques gained through disciplinary powers in pursuit of self-transformation (Armstrong, 2006; Sawicki, 2005). Discussing the possibilities Foucault identified for autonomous identity construction (i.e. resistance) within systems of power Jana Sawicki writes:

In so far as the disciplines have subjugated us by attaching us to specific identities, to specific notions of individuality, our autonomy is bound up with questionable mechanisms of social control. At the same time, if power is something that is exercised, and if we are capable of critical reflection upon the historical conditions that constitute us, we are also capable of distancing ourselves from ourselves, taking up and using the discourses, techniques, and practices that have constituted us in new ways. (2005, p. 388)

Arguably, forms of resistance and autonomy as described above represent a very limited range of freedom (Armstrong, 2006). Resistance as described in the above passage emerges within historically specific, contested spaces of identity and they serve to loosen constraining identities, not to transcend power relations (Armstrong, 2006; Hartsock, 1990; Sawicki, 2005). While such resistance could certainly make the lives of individuals engaging in these attempts at self-reconstruction more tolerable, it is unclear how such specific and fragmented forms of resistance can bring about systemic changes in relations of power; as such resistance strategies of this kind are ultimately insufficient for a liberation framework (Hartsock, 1990) such as the one espoused in this project.

### ***Why Resist?***

Returning to Foucault's discussion of the effects of disciplinary power, the question of why individuals *should* resist relations of power becomes significant. Hartsock (1990) suggests that Foucault's anti-foundationalist analysis presents power as neutral and consequently provides no convincing rationale for resisting power. Although his analysis clearly provided more nuanced understandings of the oppressor/oppressed relationship than is afforded through binary understandings of oppression and domination, Foucault goes so far in his analysis as to make power differentials virtually disappear (Hartsock, 1990). Because power is always circulating in Foucault's analysis, it is difficult to locate domination; additionally, the imagery of a net that Foucault uses to describe power implies equality rather than domination in relations of power (Hartsock, 1990). Power is everywhere in Foucault's analysis and hence, for all practical purposes,

nowhere (Hartsock, 1990). If everyone participates in the network of power, why should power be resisted?

Nancy Hartsock (1990) argues that another troubling aspect of Foucault's power/knowledge formulation is that it could lead to blaming the victim for her or his own subjugation. Foucault emphasizes ways in which the micro-technologies of power operate from the bottom up; this ascending analytical format details ways in which the internalization of disciplinary and regulatory powers permit individuals to keep themselves within the norms of constricted identities that render them vehicles for their own social control. Referring to the effect of these techniques of power on the individual, Foucault writes:

This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. (Foucault, 1983, as cited in Sawicki, 2005, p. 5)

Rather than control experienced from top-down, individuals internalizes these mechanisms and regulate themselves. Thus, actual experiences of oppression become blurred; because the individual shares in the network of power and consents to her or his subjugation, Foucault's subjects seemingly become complicit in their own subjugation (Hartsock, 1990; Sawicki, 2005). Foucault (1980) clearly states that power influences individuals at the level of their desire; because subjected individuals *desire* their normalization, there is no compelling evidence why they should resist it. Would such resistance be tantamount to—as Jana Sawicki (2005) suggests—an internal contestation with oneself over more flexible yet still limited identities? In the absence of a

foundational subject in his analyses and without explicating the influence of power differentials in systems of domination, Foucault presents an understanding of power that blurs distinctions of who resists subjugation, how resistance can lead to emancipation from systems of domination, and consequently why these relations of power should be resisted.

Because Foucault's highly particularized analysis of relations of power is presented from the point of view of the dominant group<sup>8</sup> (Hartsock, 1990; Hopkins, 1997), his understanding of relationships of power is likely to differ significantly from a theory of power derived from one who self-identifies as a member of a subjugated group (Hartsock, 1990). For the purposes of this project, a more nuanced conceptualization of the relationship between power and knowledge that articulates possibilities of transcending systems of domination is required.

### **Patricia Hill Collins and the Matrix of Domination**

In *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000), Patricia Hill Collins posits a complex set of relationships between power, knowledge as self-definition, and resistance. Collins argues that structures of power are organized around a matrix of domination—the socio-historically specific organization of intersecting systems of oppression. Within the matrix of domination, specific social locations are formed by the intersection of different systems of oppression (e.g. race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.). Intersectionality, then, is

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<sup>8</sup> Dwight Hopkins (1997) argues that although Foucault was marginalized due to his homosexuality, his familial wealth and elite education still positioned him as an individual with power as domination. Additionally, Hartsock (1990) argues that Foucault's perspective may be understood as the 'colonizer who refuses' (p. 164)—one who exercises dominating power ambiguously.

Collins' conceptualization of ways in which “. . . systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization . . .” (p. 299). Different intersections of oppression produce different ways of knowing and consequently different understandings of reality.

Also important for Collins' analysis is the concept of suppressed knowledge, which she adapts from Foucault's concept of subjugated knowledge. She argues that dominant groups systematically suppress the ideas of oppressed groups in order to maintain social inequalities. Yet such suppression is unstable; those conditions which foster oppression also provide impetus for resistance. Collins argues that U. S. black women, as a historically oppressed group, have derived ways of knowing that can foster liberation. For Collins, U. S. black women, through their ongoing experiences of racial and gender oppression, have a unique vantage point from which to derive liberatory insights about oppression. She writes:

Placing U.S. Black women's experiences in the center of analysis without privileging those experiences shows how intersectional paradigms can be especially important for rethinking the particular matrix of domination that characterizes U.S. society. Claims that systems of race, social class, gender, and sexuality form mutually constructing features of social organization foster a basic rethinking of U.S. social institutions. (Collins, 2000, p. 228)

Thus Collins' analysis of power centers the experiences and ways of knowing of black women, which she argues, differ in important ways from Eurocentric, positivistic



modes of attaining knowledge.<sup>9</sup> She articulates an understanding of resisting and transcending relations of power that is based on black feminist epistemology<sup>10</sup>—those suppressed ways of knowing that black women have developed in the historical context of surviving racial and gender oppression in the U. S. which critique prevailing systems of knowledge and encourage liberation (Collins, 2000). Through her analysis, Collins expands Foucault’s presentation of power/knowledge in ways that more adequately answer who resists, how resistance occurs, and why individuals should resist relations of power. A discussion of Collins book relevant to these three questions will conclude this chapter.

### ***Who Resists?***

Collins, like Foucault, recognizes the differing levels of influence various domains of hierarchical power relations have on individual oppression. Collins argues that the matrix of domination is organized through structural (e.g. law, religion, economy), disciplinary (i.e. bureaucratic organization), hegemonic (i.e. cultural sphere), and interpersonal (i.e. personal relationships) domains of power. Unlike Foucault, however, whose description of the disciplinary techniques of power prevents the possibility of subjectivity outside relations of power, Collins’ concept of *safe spaces* allows possibilities for self-definition and subjectivity that are external to systems of domination.

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<sup>9</sup> Collins (2000) argues that the rules of Eurocentric (scientific) thought include a separation between observer and subject, suppression of personal emotions, suspending personal ethics and values, and an methodology of knowledge validation achieved through adversarial debate.

<sup>10</sup> Collins (2000) argues that black feminist epistemology is based on four main criteria: lived experience as a criterion of knowledge, use of dialogue to assess truth, meaning-making developed through an ethic of care, and an ethic of personal accountability for knowledge claims.

Safe spaces are those places where black women are free to articulate safe discourse that resists the oppressive images and ideology of the dominant group. Within these safe spaces (e.g. extended families, churches, community organizations, etc.) black women have historically been able to ‘construct independent self-definitions’ (Collins, 2000, p. 101), nurture a collective black women’s consciousness, and become empowered.

Collins emphasis on black women’s safe spaces is significant. By articulating spaces where black women had relative control over the images of themselves prevalent in the wider society, Collins is at the same time contesting Foucault’s understanding of subjectivity as only existing within relations of power. Safe spaces elude disciplinary power; the subjectivity constructed within these safe spaces is therefore not constituted within the relations of power Foucault envisioned. Describing the threat safe spaces pose to dominant groups, Collins (2000) writes:

One reason safe spaces are so threatening to those who feel excluded, and so routinely castigated by them, is that safe spaces are free of surveillance by more powerful groups. Such spaces simultaneously remove Black women from surveillance and foster the conditions for Black women’s independent self-definitions. When institutionalized, these self-definitions become foundational to politicized Black feminist standpoints. (p. 113)

By positing subjects that exist outside techniques of power, Collins provides a credible answer to who actually resists hierarchical systems of power.

### ***How Does Resistance Occur?***

Of the four domains organizing the matrix of domination (i.e. structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal), Collins recognizes that achieving resistance

and change within the first two domains is very difficult. The structural domain consists of large scale, inter-dependent social institutions that often utilize multiple forms of oppression to maintain the subordination of oppressed groups. While much of black women's struggles to gain empowerment within the structural domain have concerned the attainment of full citizenship rights (i.e. right to health care, housing, education, and employment) change within this domain necessitates changes to the social institutions that marginalize black women. When such changes have occurred they have resulted from events that threaten social order—revolutions, wars, large-scale social movements, etc. As such, the structural domain is largely resistance to change.

Additionally, the disciplinary domain, which manages power relations, is also resistant to change because bureaucratic organizations simultaneously reproduce intersecting oppressions and conceal their effects. Collins utilizes Foucault's understanding of disciplinary power as dedicated to disciplining and subjecting individuals to surveillance in order to control them. Collins argues that strategies for resistance within disciplinary domains must come from inside these systems, but that such strategies do not hold great promise for success. Discussing the limited success for black women's resistance to disciplinary powers within academic settings Collins writes:

Given the power of surveillance in the disciplinary domain, it is unrealistic to expect that any essentially radical Black feminist thought will emanate from within the academy, especially in times when marketplace ideologies have become so prominent . . . Marketplace ideologies increasingly affect all aspects of life, including actual people and ideas about people in outsider-within locations . . . If an organization perceives that it needs outsiders within, it buys them. (2000, p. 283)

Unlike structural and disciplinary domains of power, Collins argues that hegemonic and interpersonal domains are highly susceptible to human action. Furthermore, the inter-related nature of these domains suggests that changes to the hegemonic and interpersonal domains will ultimately result in changes to disciplinary and structural domains as well.

The hegemonic domain concerns matters of ideology, culture, and consciousness; it justifies actions in the structural and disciplinary domains by maintaining common sense ideas that support dominant groups by receiving support for these ideas from subordinate groups. Thus for Collins, resistance in the hegemonic domain consists of developing consciousness as a sphere of freedom from which to theorize processes of social change. Collins (2000) writes:

The significance of the hegemonic domain of power lies in its ability to shape consciousness via the manipulation of ideas, images, symbols, and ideologies. As Black women's struggle for self-definition suggest, in contexts such as these where ideas matter, reclaiming the "power of a free mind" constitutes an important area of resistance. Reversing this process whereby intersecting oppressions harness various dimensions of individual subjectivity for their own ends becomes a central purpose of resistance. (p. 285)

While important, reclaiming conscious spheres of mental freedom where critiques of hegemonic ideologies can be articulated represents for Collins, reactionary forms of resistance. She argues that the construction of new knowledge provides other important pro-active avenues for black women's empowerment.

Collins views the interpersonal domain of power—manifested through the daily practices of human relationships—as a fruitful site for creating and disseminating new

knowledge about human relationships that empower black women as well as other marginalized groups. She argues that empowerment, based on knowledge gained through a black feminist epistemology, can inspire human agency against systems of domination and foster social justice. She writes:

Black women's empowerment involves revitalizing U.S. Black feminism as a social justice project organized around the dual goals of empowering African-American women and fostering social justice in a transnational context. Black feminist thought's emphasis on the ongoing interplay between Black women's oppression and Black women's activism presents the matrix of domination and its interrelated domains of power as responsive to human agency. Such thought views the world as a dynamic place where the goal is not merely to survive or to fit in or to cope; rather, it becomes a place where we feel ownership and accountability. The existence of Black feminist thought suggests that there is always choice, and power to act, no matter how bleak the situation may appear to be. Viewing the world as one in the making raises the issue of individual responsibility for bringing about change. It also shows that while individual empowerment is key, only collective action can effectively generate the lasting institutional transformation required for social justice. (Collins, 2000, p. 290)

While Foucault discounts notions of foundational subjects whose actions can change history (Sawicki, 2005), the above passage from Collins posits that social change directly resulting from human action is possible. Although the structural and disciplinary domains of power are, in and of themselves, highly resistant to change, the relationships among all four domains (i.e. hegemonic domain links together structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains and the interpersonal domain constitutes transmission of hegemonic ideas into daily action) suggests that changes to the hegemonic and interpersonal domains will result in eventual transformation to all domains. Thus, Collins' analysis presents a clear articulation of how resistance and change can occur in all four domains of power.

### ***Why Resist?***

By centering her analysis on the experiences of black women, Collins (2000) presents a clear argument for why black women should resist systems of power. Yet on surface, her analysis seems not to remedy the third major critique leveled at Foucault's analysis of power/knowledge—that his circulating network of power blurs aspects of domination and subsequently makes it difficult to understand why individuals who are complicit in relations of power would resist (Hartsock, 1990). While Collins analysis is not constructed as an explicit contestation of Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, the focus of her work, which entails outlining strategies for the systematic resistance and transcendence of systems of domination, necessarily furthers understandings of power and knowledge in ways that Foucault's specific and fragmented analyses (Gutting, 2005) did not.

Though Collins work begins with the ways of knowing particular to U. S. black women, it does not privilege their experiences over those of other marginalized groups; she presents her analysis in ways that are inclusive to all marginalized groups. Her analysis originates from black women's standpoint because, as a black woman, this is the intersectionality she is most familiar with. Collins makes it clear in the following passage that black women's epistemology represents one piece of a larger social justice project when she writes:

. . . it is important to remember that Black women's full empowerment can occur only within a transnational context of social justice. While focused on U. S. Black women, U. S. black feminism constitutes one of many historically specific social justice projects dedicated to fostering the empowerment of groups within an overarching context of justice. In this sense, Black feminist thought constitutes

one part of a much larger social justice project that goes far beyond the experiences of African-American women. (Collins, 2000, p. 19)

Collins articulates her belief that black feminist thought can be an important point of origin from which other groups can gain insights to previously unnoticed aspects of their oppression. By building on the unique knowledge gained from black women's standpoint, these groups can further their own social justice causes. She writes:

By advocating, refining, and disseminating Black feminist thought, individuals from other groups who are engaged in similar social justice projects—Black men, African women, White men, Latinas, White women, and members of other U. S. racial/ethnic groups, for example—can identify points of connection that further social justice projects . . . U.S. Black feminist thought fully actualized is a collaborative enterprise. It must be open to coalition building with individuals engaged in similar social justice projects. (Collins, 2000, pp. 37-38)

Thus Collins' black feminist thought is clearly inclusive towards social justice for all oppressed groups. Rather than simply paying lip service to the notion of social justice for all, Collins' understanding of the matrix of domination necessitates that black women's emancipation from systems of domination is intricately connected to the emancipation of all marginalized groups from these same mutually constructed systems.

A major benefit of Collins' presentation of intersectional oppression is that it provides a much fuller understanding of ways in which the matrices of oppression interact to produce variations in lived experiences. Rather than assuming that all women experience patriarchal oppression in the same way, for example, Collins' model emphasizes ways in which oppressive spheres of race, class, and nation can interact to organize very different lived experiences for white women, U. S. black women, and

third-world women. In turn, these diverse lived experiences result in varied understandings of and strategies of resistance to oppression. Additionally, by emphasizing the relational nature of the matrix of domination, Collins demonstrates ways in which all individuals participate to varying degrees in systems of oppression. In the following passage, Collins discusses the significance of U. S. black women's, U. S. white women's, and non-U. S. women's mutually constructed group histories within the matrix of domination. She writes:

It is important to remember that U. S. Black women's group history remains interdependent with those of other groups—patterns characterizing one group's experiences are intimately linked to those of other groups. For example, in the U. S. context, the social construction of U. S. white womanhood as pure, fragile, and in need of protection from the assaults of “violent” African-American men required the use of differential patterns of institutionalized sexual violence against both African-American women and men. The transnational context reveals similar contradictions. U. S. nation-state foreign politics inflict comparable violence upon women outside U. S. borders. Both domestically and transnationally, through threats of violence or actual violence, groups actively police each other to ensure that domination is maintained. (Collins, 2000, p. 247)

Collins' analysis, therefore, like Foucault's, prevents binary thinking in terms of categorizing groups as completely oppressed or purely oppressors and instead encourages both/and conceptualizations of oppression and power. In doing so, Collins' analysis emphasizes the complicated ways in which groups participate in and are simultaneously subjected to domination. Collins differs from Foucault, however, in the conclusions she draws from these complex relations of power. For Collins, both/and conceptualizations of power necessitate that groups claiming to be oppressed must also be held accountable for their oppression of others. She argues that those groups claiming “moral positions as



survivors of one expression of systematic violence” (Collins, 2000, p. 247) lose credibility if they fail to acknowledge responsibility for other expressions of violence. By demonstrating the myriad ways in which oppressed groups are not only subjugated through the domains of power, but also the ways in which these groups yield power over others, Collins unmasks processes which sustain the matrix of domination. In doing so, her analysis provides a compelling rationale for why individuals should resist systems of domination. Simply put, no one can be free of oppression until everyone is free; everyone must resist the domains of power in order for social justice to be fully realized.

### ***Significance of Collins’ Analysis of Power for this Project***

Particularly useful for this project is Collins’ argument that individuals subjected to various forms of intersecting oppressions have a unique vantage point from which to articulate ideas about oppression and strategies for liberation. She refers to Black women as often having an ‘outsider within status’ that facilitates novel conceptualizations of oppression and resistance. Borrowing Collins’ concept of the ‘outsider within,’<sup>11</sup> this project seeks to discover whether the accumulation of subjugated knowledge derived from various outsider within positions can yield new insights about oppression and new strategies for social justice.

Although the thematic content of Collins’ analysis will be retained for this project, her focus on black women will not. Whereas Collins centered her black feminist epistemology on the experiences of black women, this project will instead initiate its thought project using various contemporary expression of black theology. This project

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<sup>11</sup> Poet and activist Audre Lorde developed this phrase, but I am relying on Collins’ (2000) use of this term.

contends that as a form of oppositional knowledge developed in response to black oppression in the U. S., black theology should offer insights into both resistance strategies and methods to transcend systems of domination.

The unique outsider within status experienced by black theologians (i.e. within their religion, their academic institutions, and U. S. society), is hypothesized to provide novel understandings of oppression capable of transcending systems of domination. Within black theology's struggle to make sense of historical situations of enslavement and present-day oppression in light of beliefs that God is actively working to liberate the oppressed, this discipline tackles ultimate questions of meaning, appropriation, authenticity, and liberation. As such, black theology provides an apt starting point for this thought project on subjugated and oppositional knowledge.

### **Chapter Outline**

The proposed analysis is necessarily context bound. Thus, the first step in analyzing contemporary black theological texts for their oppressive themes and transcendent potential is to trace the historical context within which these particularized discourses developed. Chapter II of this project, therefore, discusses in abbreviated form, the historical development of black theological discourse. Having situated the context of black theological discourse, Chapter III will analyze the libratory content of contemporary black theological texts.

The fourth chapter of this project will focus on another important concept expressed in Collins' analysis—transversal politics (i.e. empathetic dialogue with other political groups with the goal of building coalitions for social justice). For Collins,

transversal politics are necessary for social justice because “. . . each group possesses a partial perspective on its own experiences and on those of other groups” (p. 247). No group is capable of achieving social justice alone because their partial perspective fails to reveal the full complexities of relationships of domination. Collins’ understanding of transversal politics suggests that the libratory potential of black theology as an oppositional knowledge is also limited to a partial perspective on oppression. Therefore, for the purposes of this project, libratory black theological discourse will be engaged in dialogue with other social justice projects characterized by an ‘outsider within’ status. The purpose of this encounter will be to determine whether dialogue between these various forms of subjugated and oppositional knowledge can produce a re-articulated black theology capable of realizing a fuller understanding of oppression and capable of facilitating social justice for all marginalized groups. Finally, chapter five of this project will situate this thought experiment within a discourse of critical pedagogy in order to explicate practical ways in which these accumulated oppositional knowledge forms can be used in a pedagogy of social justice for all.

**CHAPTER II**

**AN ABBREVIATED HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF  
BLACK RELIGIOUS THOUGHT (1619-1999)**

As scholars have noted, every text has a context (Hopkins, 1999); awareness of this context arguably leads to greater understanding of the text itself. Relevant to a primary goal of this project—ascertaining the libratory potential of black theological texts—this chapter examines the socio-historical context within which black theological discourse developed in the U. S. A complete historical account of the development of black theology would be a monumental task; such an undertaking is beyond the purpose and scope of this dissertation. Instead, this chapter provides an abbreviated history of the development of black religious thought from the arrival of the first enslaved Africans in America<sup>12</sup> to the present. Such a historical review is necessary to accurately situate the religious discourse to be analyzed in the subsequent chapter.

This review will be organized historically, along four epochs<sup>13</sup> in black American history and in black religious thought. These time frames are: 1619-1808 (approximate period from the arrival of slaves in Virginia to the official end of the slave trade); 1808-1865 (approximate end of the slave trade to the end of the Civil War); 1865-1960 (end of the Civil War to beginning of the Civil Rights movement); and 1960 –1999 (beginning of Civil Rights movement to end of the millennium). In order to honor the nuances and

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<sup>12</sup> Cornel West (1982, 1993a) cites this event as the initiation of black theological reflection.

<sup>13</sup> Time frames loosely based on those provided by Raboteau and Wills (2003).

diverse streams of black religious thought that developed in each time period, an attempt has been made to present numerous excerpts from black Americans (along with socio-contextual information on the authors) discussing themes of oppression, Christianity, and liberation in each period. While these excerpts certainly do not represent the entirety of documented black theological discourse, they are illustrative of the scope and breadth of black theology.

### **1619-1808**

In *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African-American Religious Thought* (2002), Anthony Pinn argues that any investigation of African American religious thought/theological discourse must consider the psychological import of the Middle Passage of Africans from slave ports in Africa to the Americas—the passage into slavery. Not all Africans came to America as slaves, however; the first group of Africans arrived in Virginia in 1619 as indentured servants and were later freed on that basis (Finkelman, 2003; Woodson, 1925). Some Africans also came to America as explorers (Pinn, 2002). Still, most Africans in America were slaves and it was the condition of slavery that framed the worldview from which their theological discourse/reflection emerged.

In the following excerpt, Olaudah Equiano, who was kidnapped from what is now Nigeria, discusses his experience on a slave ship destined for the New World. Equiano and his sister were kidnapped while playing outside and then separated from each other.

Here in an excerpt from his autobiography,<sup>14</sup> he describes his experience on the Middle Passage. He writes:

At last, when the ship we were in had got in all her cargo, they made ready with many fearful noises, and we were all put under deck, so that we could not see how they managed the vessel. But this disappointment was the least of my sorrow. The stench of the hold while we were on the coast was so intolerably loathsome, that it was dangerous to remain there for any time, and some of us had been permitted to stay on the deck for the fresh air; but now that the whole ship's cargo were confined together, it became absolutely pestilential. The closeness of the place, and the heat of the climate, added to the number in the ship, which was so crowded that each had scarcely room to turn himself, almost suffocated us. This produced copious perspirations, so that the air soon became unfit for respiration, from a variety of loathsome smells, and brought on a sickness among the slaves, of which many died, thus falling victims to the improvident avarice, as I may call it, of their purchasers. This wretched situation was again aggravated by the galling of the chains, now become insupportable; and the filth of the necessary tubs, into which the children often fell, and were almost suffocated. The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable. Happily perhaps for myself I was soon reduced so low here that it was thought necessary to keep me almost always on deck; and from my extreme youth I was not put in fetters. In this situation I expected every hour to share the fate of my companions, some of whom were almost daily brought upon deck at the point of death, which I began to hope would soon put an end to my miseries... Every circumstance I met with served only to render my state more painful, and heighten my apprehensions, and my opinion of the cruelty of the whites. (1789, pp. 78-80)

By the time Equiano arrived in the New World a functioning slave system was well in place. The realization of a slave society began in 1660, when the Virginia Legislature began passing laws that recognized slavery and protected slaveholders' interests (Finkelman, 2003). Slave legislation from other Southern colonies soon followed. Slavery, however, did not spread as rapidly in the North due to large number of

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<sup>14</sup> Some evidence suggests Equiano may not have been born in Africa and may have used other slave accounts to describe the middle passage; no evidence suggests, however, that Equiano's description whether about himself or other slaves was inaccurate. For information on this debate see for example <http://www.brycchancarey.com/equiano/nativity.htm>.

Quaker and Puritan settlers in the area (Finkelman, 2003). As the slave trade increased, debate arose about the Christianization of African slaves. Many slaveholders resisted attempts to provide religious instruction to slaves. Slaveholder resistance was largely related to time and linguistic constraints, racist beliefs, and concern over the implications of slave conversion (Raboteau, 2001).

Prior to the first Great Awakening during the 1720's and 40's, Protestant religious conversion emphasized reading the Bible and understanding religious doctrine (Raboteau, 1978). Thus, in order for slaves to be converted, they needed to be literate. Language barriers made catechesis extremely difficult; moreover, the slave work schedule left little time for comprehensive religious instruction (Raboteau, 1978; 2001). Many slaveholders also resisted attempts to Christianize slaves because they felt slaves lacked the humanity to understand Christian religious instruction (Raboteau, 1978). A large population of slaveholders also opposed the Christianization of slaves for a very different reason—they feared that conversion would make slaves impudent or, worse, lead to emancipation (Finkelman, 2003; Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Raboteau, 1978, 2001). For many slaveholders, slave conversion to Christianity threatened to subvert the notion of black inferiority/white superiority that under-girded the slave system in the South. Speaking to these implications of slave conversion, Raboteau (1978) writes:

The danger beneath the arguments for slave conversion which many masters feared was the egalitarianism implicit in Christianity. The most serious obstacle to the missionary's access to the slaves was the slaveholder's vague awareness that a Christian slave would have some claim to fellowship, a claim that threatened the security of the master-slave hierarchy. Even after other fears had been removed by legislation or by argument, unease with the concept of spiritual equality

between master and slave caused slave owners to reject the idea of Christianizing slaves. (p. 102)

The reluctance of many white slave owners to allow religious instruction and conversion of slaves led to legislation that denied that the baptism of slaves would allow them their freedom (Finkelman, 2003; Raboteau, 1978, 2001). Although some slaveholders began introducing Christianity to African slaves, the majority of slaveholders continued to resist slave Christianization well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Raboteau, 1978). The overwhelming initial resistance of many slaveholders to slave Christianization, despite legislation which protected slaveholder interests, highlights tensions that arose from the paradox of Christianizing (i.e. bringing to slaves a religion that supposedly offered liberation through the realization of right relationships with God and neighbor) a group of people relegated to lifelong enslavement. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the history of black religious thought reveals at the same time efforts to subvert the master-slave hierarchy and instances of reinforcing that hierarchy.

Concerned with the propagation of Christianity and cognizant of the economic concerns of slaveholders, missionaries increased efforts to bring about the Christianization of African slaves through sermons and publications that presented Christianity as a means of slave control (Pinn, 2002; Raboteau, 1978). Clergy argued that the Christianization of African “heathens” was mandated by the gospel and would make slaves better servants by inculcating in them the Christian duty to love and serve (Raboteau, 1978). Discussing the Christianization of the North American slave system



Pinn (2002) explains how Puritan and Anglican missionaries used Christianity to justify African enslavement. He writes:

Puritans and Anglicans, among others, often sought to bring these two concerns—material wealth and spiritual conversion—into a functioning harmony by arguing that God required the conversion of these heathen creatures. Albeit important, this conversion affected the soul and had no bearing on the physical condition of chattel. Using the story of Ham and decontextualized segments of New Testament Epistles, slaveholders tried to provide divine sanction for the maintenance of the slave system. In this way they were able to maintain their property, and missionaries were able to feel as if they were working in accordance with the demands of the gospel...it was understood that Africans brought with them little cultural or religious value. They were considered inadequate creatures, subhumans, whose skin color was a clear sign of divine displeasure and therefore justified enslavement. (p. 2)

Some missionaries<sup>15</sup> argued for the humanity of African slaves and for blacks' biblically-sanctioned equality with whites (Raboteau, 1978). Though such arguments did counter popular presentations of Africans as beasts, they still portrayed African culture as deficient and African people as the God-ordained servants of whites. Thus Pinn (2002) is correct when he contends that African culture was not valued in America. The colonists' perceptions of enslaved Africans, their cultural worth, and their divinely mandated enslavement was connected to a belief in manifest destiny among the colonists who understood themselves to be God's new elect—a chosen people constructing the kingdom of God (Pinn, 2002). As will also be demonstrated in this chapter, the colonial notion of manifest destiny is one of the meta-narratives appropriated by enslaved Africans and later

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<sup>15</sup> See for example *The Negro Christianized: An Essay to Execute and Assist that Good Work, The Instruction of Negro Servants in Christianity* (1706) by Cotton Mather.

by African Americans as they have sought to make sense of their circumstances in America.

Enslaved Africans brought diverse religious beliefs and practices (including elements of Islamic and Catholic faiths) with them to America (Raboteau & Wills, 2003). High death rates, separation of families and tribal groups, and strong efforts by whites to eradicate non-Christian religious practices were all factors that combined to make the preservation of these beliefs and practices difficult; some were preserved, however (Raboteau & Wills, 2003). The presence of forms of African religious traditions in the New World, as well as the practice of enslaved believers of all traditions borrowing from different religious practices to help them cope with enslavement (Raboteau & Wills, 2003) makes it difficult to know what conversion really meant for the first African slaves converted to Christianity. Raboteau (1978) describes the complexities of African conversion to Christianity in the following passage. He writes:

Adopting to the foreign culture of the Europeans meant for Africans not the total abandonment of their own cosmologies but, rather, a process of integrating the new into the old, of interpreting the unfamiliar by reference to the familiar. Catechesis moved in two directions. The slaves were taught the prayers, doctrines, and rites of Christianity, but as the missionaries realized, the slaves had to somehow understand the meaning of Christian belief and ritual if instruction was to become more than mere parroting. And here the whites had only limited control. For the slaves brought their cultural past to the task of translating and interpreting the doctrinal words and ritual gestures of Christianity. Therefore the meaning which the missionary wished the slaves to receive and the meaning which the slaves actually found (or, better, made) were not the same. (p. 126)

Thus, the Christianized slave likely possessed elements of both traditional African religions and Protestant Christianity. Raboteau and Wills (2003) concur that surviving

Africanisms (i.e. isolated songs, rhythms, movements, belief in the curative power of roots, and belief in the efficacy of a world of spirits and ancestors) were often combined with various forms of Christianity. Several points of synchronicity between Christianity and traditional African religions likely made conversion to Christianity easier. African religious beliefs of a Supreme Being as creator of all, a realistic distinction between good and evil, a belief in after-life, and the usage of prayer to honor God were all Africanisms which paralleled the Hebraic background of Christianity (Matthews, 1995; Raboteau, 1978) and likely provided African slaves with a frame of reference within which to interpret Christianity.

Some slaves were converted to Christianity during the early 1700's when the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel began efforts at conversion (Pinn, 2002), most slaves at that time, however, rejected the precepts of Christianity (Raboteau, 1978; 2001). The slaves most likely to be converted during this time were house servants, artisans, and urban slaves; slaves in rural areas and those who worked in the plantation fields had less opportunity for religious instruction and church attendance (Baer, 1998; Raboteau, 1978). Because Christianity was not accepted by most slaves at this time (Baer, 1998), the colonial debate over the Christianization of slaves had little practical influence on slave life and culture. It was not until the first and second Great Awakenings (1720-1740 and 1790-1815, respectively) brought about a religious renaissance (Raboteau, 1978) that barriers to slave religious conversion (i.e., lack of religious practice among Southern colonists, short supply of clergy, lack of English speaking slaves, and lack of legal

support for the propagation of Christianity) decreased and Christianity became established as an overarching framework for black religious life (Raboteau, 1978).

Black religious discourse<sup>16</sup> that arose during this time, then, largely developed in the North. The following textual excerpts represent some of the earliest documented public black religious discourses. Written by a free black man, a former indentured servant, and a life-long slave, respectively, the works are diverse yet all speak to the issues of black oppression and Christianity. Although blacks certainly discussed issues of oppression and Christianity prior to 1776 (the date of the first black theological text for this chapter), it was not until that time that large numbers of blacks, resulting from the struggle for the rights of man, were afforded opportunities for literacy and public discourse (Woodson, 1925). It should be remembered then, that these texts are representative of some of the earliest *documented* black religious discourse, not the earliest black religious discourse.

Lemuel Haynes, an indentured Massachusetts servant born to a white mother and an African father, earned his freedom in 1774 and joined a military unit in Connecticut. Haynes fought in the Revolutionary War and, inspired by the Declaration of Independence, wrote *Liberty Further Extended* (1776) in which he urged the abolishment of slavery in revolutionary language. Likening the cause of black freedom to that of white Americans, he writes:

Liberty is a Jewel which was handed down to man from the cabinet of Heave, and is Coeval with his Existence. And as it proceed from the Supreme Legislature of

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<sup>16</sup> In this initial stage of black theological reflection, the discourse to be examined met three criteria. It was written or spoken to the public, it discussed black oppression, and it invoked a Christian frame of reference.

the universe, so it is he which hath a sole right to take it away; therefore, he that would take away a man's Liberty assumes a prerogative that Belongs to another, and acts out of his own domain . . . To affirm, that an Englishman has a right to his Liberty, is a truth which has Been so clearly Evinced, Especially of Late, that to spend time in illustrating this, would be But Superfluous tautology. But I query, whether Liberty is so contracted a principle as to be confined to any nation under Heaven; nay, I think it not hyperbolic to affirm, that Even an African, has Equally as good a right to his Liberty in common with Englishmen . . . But, as I observed Before, those privileges that are granted to us By the Divine Being, no one has the Least right to take them from us without our consent; and there is Not the Least precept, or practice, in the Sacred Scriptures, that constitutes a Black man a Slave, any more than a white one. (Haynes, 1776, p. 2)

Here it is clear that Haynes interpretations of biblical text do not prevent him from critiquing the system of slavery and the hypocrisy of white Americans who recognize their own desire for 'liberty or death' but not those of African Americans.

Illustrative of the diversity of black religious interpretations of Christianity during the first phase of black religious reflection is Jupiter Hammon. The following passage is taken from Hammon's (1787) *Address to the Negroes of the State of New York*. In this address, Hammon (himself a New York slave) urges slaves to be obedient, hard working, and honest in order to secure a place for themselves in Heaven. While seemingly submissive to white domination, Hammon's speech also is subversive because it indicates that the condition of slavery is one that should be destroyed by God. He writes:

Now I acknowledge that liberty is a great thing, and worth seeking for, if we can get it honestly, and by our good conduct, prevail on our masters to set us free: Though for my own part I do not wish to be free, yet I should be glad, if others, especially the young Negroes were to be free, for many of us, who are grown up slaves, and have always had masters to take care of us, should hardly know how to take care of ourselves; and it may be more for our own comfort to remain as we are. That liberty is a great thing we may know from our own feelings, and we may likewise judge so from the conduct of the white-people, in the late war. How much money has been spent, and how many lives has been lost, to defend their

liberty. I must say that I have hoped that God would open their eyes, when they were so much engaged for liberty, to think of the state of the poor blacks, and to pity us. He has done it in some measure, and has raised us up many friends, for which we have reason to be thankful, and to hope in his mercy. What may be done further, he only knows, for known unto God are all his ways from the beginning. (Hammon, 1787/2002, pp. 32-33)

Hammon's speech was later reprinted by many groups opposed to slavery (Wikipedia, 2006c) as part of the anti-slavery movement. Although a strong anti-slavery movement originally existed in the South among non-slaveholders, the invention of the Cotton Gin in 1793 initiated decline in Southern antislavery sentiments (Matthews, 1995). The cotton gin facilitated cotton production and made cotton a cash crop in the South; the South's fortune would signal a decline in the well-being of slaves and free blacks in America (WGBH Educational Foundation, 1998). Increased cotton production led to concomitant increases in demand for labor. Yet with the likelihood of the end of the Atlantic slave trade (abolitionists began strongly pressuring congress to end the international slave trade in the 1790's), dictated that new slave labor be limited to slaves already in America. Consequently, slaveholders began developing defenses of slavery that would help to ensure the labor they needed (Finkelman, 2003).

Tobacco plantations, no longer profitable, sold their slaves to owners of new cotton lands in the south and west, tearing apart black families as they did so (WGBH Educational Foundation, 1998). The increased demand for cotton labor also threatened free blacks in the North. With the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793 any white person could claim a black person as a fugitive and sell him or her into slavery; blacks (free or slave) were not allowed to testify against whites in court in the South and

therefore had no recourse against the Fugitive Slave Act unless another white person testified on their behalf (WGBH Educational Foundation, 1998).

Yet in the midst of these oppressive conditions, blacks who fought during the Revolutionary War (such as Lemuel Haynes, mentioned earlier) complicated the legitimization of the master-slave hierarchy. The hypocrisy of fighting for emancipation from Great Britain while holding slaves in captivity was obvious. Moreover, the heroism of black soldiers who fought in defense of America subverted notions of black inferiority and suggested that enslaved blacks could be useful citizens (Finkelman, 2003). The hypocrisy of American slavery and the assertion of humanity by blacks combined with the economic need of slave labor to create tensions that would erupt at the end of the second phase of black theological development. Indicative of these tensions is the final black theological excerpt from this phase of black religious development.

The final excerpt was written by a free black man using the pseudonym “Othello.” The exact date of the piece is uncertain (yet it was originally published in a collection of black literature in 1808). The use of a pseudonym was not uncommon for black men who spoke against slavery at this time because the freedom of speech afforded due to the struggle for the rights of man did not always include black men (Woodson, 1925). In the following passage, “Othello” expressed indignation that the plight of blacks in slavery does not arouse public outrage, given the emphasis on the rights of man. Understanding Christianity as antithetical to black enslavement, “Othello” warns that God will seek vengeance against those who enslave blacks. He writes:

The voice of injured thousands who have been violently torn from their native country and carried to distant and inhospitable climes...will ascend to the throne of Omnipotence, and, from the elevated heights of heaven, cause him, with the whole force of Almighty vengeance, to hurl the guilty perpetrators of those inhuman beings down the steep precipice of inevitable ruin into the bottomless gulf of final, irretrievable and endless destruction! ...Ye sons of America, forbear!—Consider the dire consequences that will attend the prosecution, against which the all-powerful God of nature holds up his hands and loudly proclaims, desist! (“Othello,” 1925, p. 21)

Further in the passage, “Othello” emphasizes the hypocrisy and egocentrism of American Christians who tend to view all others as uncivilized or barbarians. He continues:

In the insolence of self-consequence we are accustomed to esteem ourselves and the Christian powers of Europe the only civilized people on the globe; the rest, without distinction, we presumptuously denominate barbarians. But, when the practices above mentioned come to be deliberately considered . . . we shall acknowledge, if we possess the smallest degree of candor, that the appellation of barbarian does not belong to them alone. While we continue those practices the term Christian will only be a burlesque expression signifying more than that it ironically denominates the rudest sect of barbarians that ever disgraced the hand of their creator. (“Othello,” 1925, p. 21)

In his contention that “true” Christianity is incompatible with black enslavement, “Othello” invokes a critical interpretation of Christianity that would also be utilized by many black Christians in the following phase of black theological development.

### **1808-1865**

The second phase of black religious discourse begins with the official end of the Atlantic slave trade on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1808. Although slaves continued to be illegally transported to America after 1808, the numbers decreased dramatically allowing enough stability to form an authentic African American religious tradition (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). At this time, the second Great Awakening (1790-1815) consisted of camp meetings that



attracted both slaves and free blacks to Protestant evangelicism (Baer, 1998). With a majority English-speaking slave population, Christian instruction became more feasible (Raboteau, 1978). The rise of plantation missionaries brought religious instruction to rural and remote areas of the South so that slaves, now more capable of receiving religious instruction, could be Christianized. The number of plantation missionaries increased in 1845 when the Southern Baptist Convention initiated their own program of slave missionary work (Baer, 1998). The first Great Awakening, followed by the Official end of the slave trade, followed by second Great Awakening created an environment which marked a shift in black religious discourse and brought what would be the foundation for more stable black theological reflection.

As early as 1804, all states north of Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware had either abolished slavery or passed legislation for its gradual abolition, making slavery specific only to the South (Finkelman, 2003). Although both Northerners and Southerners profited from slavery, most Americans (in the North and South) considered slavery to be a necessary evil that had no future, given the hypocrisy of the natural rights ideology in the context of slave ownership (Finkelman, 2003; Matthews, 1995). The increased need for slaves in the South after the invention of the Cotton Gin encouraged southerners to defend slavery—not as a necessary evil, but as a positive good (Matthews, 1995). Yet the nation seemed to be moving, at least in some respects, in the direction of anti-slavery. The following excerpt is taken from a sermon delivered by Reverend Absalom Jones in honor of the official end of the international slave trade. Jones, who was born into slavery in Delaware, purchased his freedom in 1784 and later founded St. Thomas African

Church; he was ordained as the first black priest in the Episcopal Church (Wikipedia, 2006a). Jones' "Thanksgiving Sermon" (1808) appropriates the exodus motif and clearly identifies God's active involvement in the liberation of enslaved blacks, manifested in the end of the international slave trade. He states:

The history of the world shows us that the deliverance of the children of Israel from their bondage is not the only instance in which it has pleased God to appear in behalf of oppressed and distressed nations, as the deliverer of the innocent, and of those who call upon his name. He is unchangeable in his nature and character as he is in his wisdom and power. The great and blessed event, which we have met his day to celebrate, is a striking proof that the God of heaven and earth is the same, yesterday, and today, and forever. . . . He has seen the affliction of our countrymen, with an eye of pity. He has seen the wicked arts, by which wars have been fomented among the different tribes of the Africans, in order to procure captives, for the purpose of selling them for slaves . . . The ears of Jehovah have been constantly open to them: He has heard the prayers that have ascended from the hearts of his people; and he has, as in the case of his ancient and chosen people the Jews, come down to deliver our suffering countrymen from the hands of their oppressors. He came down into the United States, when they declared in the constitution which they framed in 1788, that the trade of our African fellowman should cease in the year 1808 . . . (Jones, 1808/2002, pp. 39-40)

Significantly, Jones' contention that God desires the liberation of enslaved blacks and his assertion that God acts in history to bring about black liberation lead him to ponder why such a God allowed blacks to become enslaved in the first place. As the passage continues, he reasons that slavery provided blacks a knowledge of the gospel that they might be able to bring back to Africa. He states:

It has always been a mystery, why the impartial Father of the human race should have permitted the transportation of so many millions of our fellow creatures to his country, to endure all the miseries of slavery. Perhaps his design was that a knowledge of the gospel might be acquired by some of their descendants, in order that they might become qualified to be the messengers of it, to the land of their fathers. (Jones, 1808/2002, p. 42)

Jones' ponderings speak directly to the tensions emanating from black Americans' embrace of Christianity in light of black oppression.

The 1819 debate over whether Missouri would enter the union as slave or free state brought tensions between the North and South to a head when Northern delegates suggesting the slave-holding Southerners were morally tainted (Matthews, 1995). As a result of the Missouri debate Southern politicians further enhanced pro-slavery arguments based on state's rights and notions of black racial inferiority (Matthews, 1995). Though many Northern whites did not believe that African Americans should be enslaved, they (Northern abolitionists notwithstanding) still shared the belief of Southern whites about states' rights and black inferiority to whites (Finkelman, 2003). It was within this context that some blacks began concerted efforts to obtain their own liberation from slavery. These actions influenced the presentation of religious instruction to slaves and also helped to bring about the resulting "crisis of fear" in the South.

In 1822 Denmark Vessey (a slave who purchased his freedom for \$600 after winning a \$1,500 lottery) organized an insurrection that was stopped only shortly before its implementation (Matthews, 1995). Though there had been slave rebellions in the North and South prior to Denmark Vessey's insurrection, the extensiveness of Vessey's rebellion and the involvement of trusted house servants alarmed white Southerners and helped to create a "crisis of fear" in the South (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Matthews, 1995). Because Vessey had studied biblical scripture and the issues of the Missouri debate before deciding to rebel, Southerners believed anti-slavery rhetoric was facilitating slave

rebellion (Lyerly, 1998; Matthews, 1995). They believed that curtailing slave literacy would prevent slaves from reading abolitionist literature.

During the resulting crisis of fear anti-slavery groups in the South that were once tolerated came to be seen as threats to domestic tranquility (Lyerly, 1998). Harsh new laws were passed prohibiting slaves to assemble, read and write; these laws also restricted the movement of free blacks in the South<sup>17</sup> (Lyerly, 1998; Matthews, 1995; Raboteau & Wills, 2003). This crisis of fear also resulted in increased emphasis on instructing slaves in the ways of “true” Christians in hope that they might be meek and accept their lot in life (Matthews, 1995).

The crisis of fear erupted on the heels of the second Great Awakening. The religious revivalism established through the second Great Awakening combined with the climate of fear and created a situation that was at the same time oppressive and also liberating for slaves and free blacks. The wave of religious revivalism (i.e. evangelical Protestantism) that took place in the South, as well as other regions of North America, differed qualitatively from the Protestant religion previously practiced in the colonies. The emphasis on experiential and more animated forms of worship in evangelical Protestantism was likely more appealing to slaves, free blacks, and whites in the South (Raboteau, 1978). As a result, a more hospitable climate was created in which Southern slaves, blacks and whites experienced large increases in religious conversion (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Raboteau, 1978).

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<sup>17</sup> In 1740 South Carolina enacted the Negro Act, making it illegal for slaves to gather in groups, earn money, or learn to read; it also enabled owners to kill rebellious slaves (WGBH Educational Foundation, 1998).

Whereas Protestantism in the U. S. originally viewed religious conversion as a slow and deliberate process through which one comprehensively studied the Bible and religious doctrine, the type of evangelicalism popular during the Great Awakening privileged the experience of conversion over Biblical literacy and doctrinal knowledge (Raboteau, 1978, 2001). Thus slave illiteracy (as well as slaveholder illiteracy) was not a barrier to evangelical conversion.

Congregations that were previously unsuccessful at converting slaves to Protestant Christianity refined their approaches by providing oral instruction (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Matthews, 1995; Raboteau, 1978). Special seating in churches were set aside for house slaves; some slave owners built “praise houses” and recruited black preachers to give services, while white foremen were present to monitor activities (Baer, 1998; Matthews, 1995).

While Christianity was in many regards force fed to slaves on plantations, the slaves displayed agency in the Christian denominations they became affiliated with. The majority of blacks joined Methodist and Baptist denominations (Holifield, 2003; Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Matthews, 1995; Raboteau, 2001; Raboteau & Wills, 2003). Evangelical faiths also were attractive to African Americans for practical reasons. Evangelical religious meetings allowed them to be temporarily reunited with relatives and friends from neighboring plantations and spread news to one another (Lyerly, 1998). Importantly, many clergy in these faiths promoted the idea that all Christians were equal in Gods sight; this message challenged racist ideology and gave slaves hope (Maffly-

Kipp, 2000; Lyerly, 1998). Explaining the appeal of the Methodist faith to blacks, Lyerly writes:

In Methodism slaves and free blacks found a God who did not see differences in color, caste, gender, or status. In Methodist doctrine, oppressed and victimized African Americans found a value system that prized individual choice and agency in a world where they had few choices and where their individuality was often not respected. In Methodist rituals, slaves and free blacks affirmed their sense of self-worth and humanity and openly challenged the racist ideology of their oppressors. By registering support for Methodist values, slaves could express their disdain of their owners' lifestyles, morally invert secular rankings, and proclaim their faith that God would avenge the wrongs done to them. (1998, p. 47)

The relative autonomy blacks derived from evangelical Protestantism cannot be overstated. Raboteau (1978) discusses the autonomy provided by evangelical Protestantism (especially, the Baptist and Methodist faiths) in the following passage.

The Baptists and Methodists did not insist on a well-educated clergy. A converted heart and a gifted tongue were more important than the amount of theological training received. If a converted slave showed talent for exhorting, he exhorted, and not only to black audiences. The tendency of evangelical religion to level the souls of all men before God became manifest when awakened blacks preached to unconverted whites. (Raboteau, 1978, p. 134)

Through the policies and practices of these denominations, enslaved and free blacks were provided opportunities to hold church positions, appeal to the church for justice, and even preach (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Raboteau, 1978). That these denominations provided opportunities is noteworthy; Raboteau (1978) contends that black preachers were a crucial link in the Christianization of slaves because they served as 'bicultural mediators' between the paradigm of Christianity, the African perspective, and the slave experience. Discussing the importance of black preachers, Raboteau writes:

The importance of these early black preachers in the conversion of slaves to Christianity has not been sufficiently appreciated. Emerging in the latter half of the eighteenth and the early decades of the nineteenth centuries, they acted as crucial mediators between Christian belief and the experiential world of the slaves. In effect, they were helping to shape the development of a bicultural synthesis, an Afro-American culture, by nurturing the birth of Christian communities among blacks, slave and free. (1978, p. 137)

While evangelical Protestantism provided practical benefits to southern blacks (i.e. opportunities to reunite with family and friends, opportunities for autonomy) it also provided important existential benefits. Through its emphasis on individuality and the conversion experience, evangelical Protestantism provided the space for blacks to act on their faith according to their own standards (Raboteau, 2001). These actions were often manifested in the private sphere where blacks used “hush harbors” or clandestine worship places to act on their religious faith as they saw fit.

Slaves who were permitted religious instruction often were required to worship under the supervision of whites. Slave masters frequently took house servants to church with them and required them to sit in separate balconies (Baer, 1998; Raboteau, 2001). Slave narratives reveal an oppressive element to these religious services where slaves were admonished to “obey their masters.” Catechisms were prepared to teach slaves obedience. Jones’ (1834) *A Catechism for Colored Persons* and Caspers’ (1832) *A Short Catechism for the Use of the Colored Members on Trial of the Methodist Episcopal Church in South Carolina* were popular (Raboteau, 1978).

Not surprisingly, slaves preferred to worship in the “hush harbors” (Baer, 1998; Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Raboteau, 1978). Black evangelicalism was much more expressive than white evangelicalism; this expressiveness made many blacks uncomfortable in white

churches (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Matthews, 1995; Raboteau & Wills, 2003). In private religious services, slaves could be less codified; their private styles of worship contributed to an “invisible institution”—a religious tradition that was their own (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Matthews, 1995; Raboteau & Wills, 2003). In slave quarters, they used signals and messages to organize secret meetings (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Matthews, 1995). Here they mixed African rhythms, singing, and beliefs with evangelical Christianity (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). These meetings allowed slaves to freely express their desires for a better future; the meetings also were an organizing point for rebellions such as Nat Turner’s (1831) insurrection in Virginia (Maffly-Kipp, 2000).

The agency slaves experienced in hush harbors is evidenced through their prayers for freedom even though they were forbidden to do so (Hopkins, 1991; Raboteau, 1978). That some slaves risked severe punishment to worship in hush harbors (Raboteau, 1978) is a testament to their dedication to their own form of Christian religion and to their desire to worship by their own standards.

Black evangelical ministry also was significant in the North where independent evangelical black churches first developed (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Raboteau, 1978). Although educated blacks were often successfully assimilated into white religious culture (e.g. Phyllis Wheatley), spiritual equality was preached, but not frequently practiced (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Raboteau, 2001). Thus, as early as 1790, black religious leaders in the North began efforts to form independent churches (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Raboteau, 1978). Joy St. Baptist Church was founded in Boston in 1805. The African American Presbyterian Church was founded in 1807 by John Gloucester in Philadelphia,



Pennsylvania and spread to other northern states, although the Presbyterian support of slavery thwarted growth of this church in the South (Armstrong, 2001). Abyssinian Baptist Church was formed in New York in 1808. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, was founded in 1816 by Richard Allen and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was founded in the early 1820s (Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Raboteau, 2001; Raboteau & Wills, 2003). Many of these early churches were formed out of protest to the discrimination faced in racially-mixed churches in the North (Baer, 1998). Other black evangelical independent churches would follow in the North and would also emerge in the South after the Civil War. There were also slave congregations in the South as early as 1758, but scholars debate whether these were actually independent black churches (Baer, 1998).

With the institutionalization of black religion, many black preachers developed a significant following in the South, both among blacks and whites (Holifield, 2003; Lyerly, 1998; Raboteau, 2001). The sermons, essays, public addresses, and catechisms developed by these religious figures represent the historical antecedents of black theology (Holifield, 2003). Their subject matter was diverse; as was the case in the first phase of black religious history, some black religious figures spoke within the context of standard denominational themes while others developed protest literature (Holifield, 2003). Most black sermons, especially those of slave preachers in the South took the form of biblical narratives that were reminiscent of West African storytelling practices; most of their published writings were about slavery and the condition of slaves (Holifield, 2003). Many of the black sermons in the North also dealt with slavery; due to the difference in

lived experiences between many Northern and Southern blacks, however, Northern articulations often placed the issue of slavery in broader social and political contexts. As these articulations became disseminated, blacks in the South were sensitized to these broader contexts as well. The following sermon from Nathaniel Paul is a case in point.

In 1827, Nathaniel Paul, pastor of the African Baptist Church in New York, gave a sermon in commemoration of New York's official abolition of slavery. In his speech, Paul proclaims slavery as a morally corrupt institution for slaveholders and slaves. Paul argues that slavery prevents slaveholders from receiving salvation and also bars slaves from knowledge of God. He states:

The great author of our existence has marked out the way that leads to the glories of the upper world, and through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, salvation is offered to all. But slavery forbids even the approach of mercy; it stands as a barrier in the way to ward off the influence of divine grace; it shuts up the avenues of the soul, and prevents its receiving divine instruction; and scarcely does it permit its miserable captives to know that there is a God, a Heaven or a Hell! (Paul, 1827/1925, p. 67)

Further in the passage, Paul protests the hypocrisy of the existence of slavery in America because “. . . the very soil of which is said to be consecrated in liberty, and its fruits the equal rights of man” (1827/1925, p. 69). Yet he ends his speech confident that God wills the abolition of slavery. He states:

The progress of emancipation, though slow, is nevertheless certain. It is certain because that God who has made of one blood all nations of men, and who is said to be no respecter of persons, has so decreed; I therefore has no hesitation in declaring from this sacred place that not only throughout the Unites States of America, but throughout every part of the habitable world where slavery exists, it will be abolished. (Paul, 1827/1925, p. 72)

Public discourse such as the above is significant, not only because they articulated specific messages about Christianity and black oppression in the North, but also for their influence on black religious discourse in the South. The oral and written literature emanating from the North eventually became available to blacks in the South, slave and free. Arguably, no better example of such discursive transmission can be provided than David Walker's revolutionary (1829) *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Walker, born free in the South, relocated North and wrote his Appeal to inspire enslaved blacks to resist their oppression (WGBH Educational Foundation, 1998). The context within which Walker's Appeal developed is noteworthy.

Walker's Appeal was written in the midst of heightened religious divide over slavery between the North and South that culminated in staunch Southern defenses of slavery. The religious divide over slavery that began with the 1819 Missouri debate grew more intense in 1832, during the Great Debate in the Virginia Legislature. The debate marked a change in the conceptualization of slavery in the South from a necessary evil to a positive good (Matthews, 1995). The decline of organized opposition to slavery in the South was matched by increasing abolitionism in the North by abolitionists (including free blacks) and Quakers (Finkelman, 2003; Matthews, 1995).

Although only one in eleven Southerners owned slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, those who did were usually molders of public opinion such as politicians and presidents; many slaveholders also were religious (Finkelman, 2003; Matthews, 1995). Not surprisingly then, those with the largest stake in the maintenance of slavery used all means of its defense at their disposal, biblical and otherwise. One of the most notable southern

defenses of slavery came from Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson's defense centered on economic necessity and notions of racial inferiority. In *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781), he argued that ending slavery would bring about the destruction of 'civilized' society because the Southern economy was dependent on slave labor and no viable alternative to this labor existed. Additionally, Jefferson argued that blacks were genetically inferior to whites and predisposed to sexual immorality; if emancipated, he argued, blacks would be permanently confined to serfdom and would threaten to taint the 'master class' through miscegenation (Finkelman, 2003). The irony of Jefferson's staunch defense of slavery is significant because he also (though unintentionally) provided a strong argument for slavery's abolition when he wrote these words: "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness" (as cited in Finkelman, 2003, p. 22).

While David Walker's *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* does not highlight the irony of Jefferson's *Notes*, it does sharply criticize Jefferson's argument of black inferiority as ridiculous and unfair, given the debilitating and dehumanizing effects of slavery. Walker's *Appeal* was banned by Southern states because it urged slaves to resist their bondage by whatever means were available to them. He writes:

Has Mr. Jefferson declared to the world, that we are inferior to the whites, both in the endowments of our bodies and our minds? It is indeed surprising, that a man of such great learning, combined with such excellent natural parts, should speak so of a set of men in chains. I do not know what to compare it to, unless, like putting one wild deer in an iron cage, where it will be secured, and hold another by the side of the same, then let it go, and expect the one in the cage to run as fast as the one at liberty. (Walker, 1829, p. 12)

Further in the text, Walker suggests that for enslaved blacks, submitting to white Americans is sinful because it subverts the legitimate role of Jesus Christ as the master of all humanity. Walker (1829) writes:

Did our Creator make us to be slaves to dust and ashes like ourselves? Are they not dying worms as well as we? Have they not to make their appearance before the tribunal of Heaven, to answer for the deeds done in the body, as well as we? Have we any other Master but Jesus Christ alone? Is he not their Master as well as ours?—What right then, have we to obey and call any other Master, but Himself? How we could be so *submissive* to a gang of men, whom we cannot tell whether they are as good as ourselves or not, I never could conceive. However, this is shut up with the Lord, and we cannot precisely tell—but I declare, we judge men by their works. (Walker, 1829, pp. 19-20)

As mentioned previously, Northern black religious discourse such as the above, found its way south and consequently influenced the religious discourse of the South. Within weeks of its publication, copies of Walker's Appeal (though banned) were found in Georgia; a few months later, copies were found in Virginia and Louisiana (PBS online, 2006).

Jefferson's was not the only popular defense of slavery in the South. Another popular defense was articulated by Richard Furman, 1822 president of the state Baptist Convention. Furman's biblical defense of slavery posited that slavery was an accepted institution in the Bible—one that was participated in by biblical patriarchs and never condemned by Jesus (Matthews, 1995). Furman further argued that as descendants of Ham, blacks in America were predestined for enslavement (Matthews, 1995).

Naturally, Southern slavery defenses were countered by Northern arguments against slavery. In the North, arguments against slavery often referred to the New

Testament passage that God created “Of one blood, all nations of men,” to the “Golden Rule,” and to the notion that slavery was antithetical to the spirit of Christianity; other anti-slavery arguments appealed to biblical hermeneutics and challenged the contention that Africans were descendents of Ham and therefore cursed into slavery (Holifield, 2003).

The debate over slavery spurred Quakers and Mennonites to gradually purge slaveholders from their communities; Methodists briefly attempted to ban slaveholding among its members but soon dropped the rule due to overwhelming resistance (Holifield, 2003; Lyerly, 1998). Fearing the loss of church members, bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church ordered their preachers to abstain from abolitionism (Matthews, 1995). As these brief illustrations attest, the debate over the ‘peculiar institution’ not only divided the nation, but also the religious denominations within the nation.

### *Interpretations of Christianity*

As the religious renaissance continued, the sources from which blacks could receive messages of Christianity multiplied. The introduction and indoctrination to Christianity could come from slaveholders, non-slaveholders, missionaries, licensed or unlicensed black preachers (slave or free), from relatives, other slaves, or any combination of the above and such messages could be received in formal religious organizations or (for slaves) in hush harbors. It should not be surprising then, that the reactions to Christianity and interpretations slaves and free blacks derived from Christianity were diverse. Raboteau (1978) expresses the diversity of slave responses to Christianity in the following passage. He writes:

Some slaves resented the message of docility preached by the missionaries and rejected it out of hand as “white man’s religion.” Still another attitude toward religious practice was expressed by those slaves who complained that they were too weary to attend church, and that it was “hard for them to serve their earthly and heavenly master too.” And, of course, there were slaves who found meaning in the message spread by plantation missionaries, accepted it on faith and tried their best to incorporate it in their lives. (Raboteau, 1978, p. 177)

Many scholars of black religious history argue that blacks in America who accepted Christianity adopted a critical hermeneutic that cut through oppressive renderings of the gospel (i.e. “white” religion) in favor of more liberating ones (Cone, 1975; Lyerly, 2003; Maffly-Kipp, 2000; Matthews, 1995; Raboteau, 1978). Slave narratives reveal that many slaves believed the after-life to consist of a reversal of the earthly hierarchy wherein blacks would dominate and whites would be enslaved (Hopkins, 1991; Raboteau, 1978). Whatever else these beliefs may suggest, they reveal a strong suspicion about the ‘natural’ order of things as evidenced through the Southern master-slave hierarchy. These narratives also reflect a rejection of moral admonitions that slaves not steal or lie; many slaves viewed deceiving slaveholders or “putting on ole massa,” not as a sin, but as a strategy for survival in an unjust system (Hopkins, 1991; Raboteau, 1978). Moreover, “sins” such as stealing were considered by some slaves to be ridiculous when they themselves were stolen from their homeland (Raboteau, 1978).

Critical interpretations of the Bible encouraged many slaves to resist their dehumanization and assert their autonomy. As previously discussed, slaves asserted their autonomy by joining denominations of their own choosing (Lyerly, 2003; Maffly-Kipp, 2000) and by worshiping in hush harbors (Hopkins, 1991; Raboteau, 1978). Although slaves were forbidden from praying for physical freedom (Raboteau, 1978) many

believed slavery to be contrary to the will of God and prayed in the hush harbors for their freedom. In doing so, many slaves clung to the Old Testament exodus motif as representative of their inevitable freedom (Hopkins, 1991; Raboteau, 1978).

There were also slaves and free blacks in America that did not appear to utilize a critical lens when interpreting Christianity. Raboteau (1978) contends that some blacks accepted the moral precepts of Christianity at face value and devoted themselves to lives of virtue while accepting slavery as their lot in life. Yet he points out that even those slaves who accepted the religious precepts of Christianity as provided can be viewed as asserting their humanity and self-definition (Raboteau, 1978). Many slaves who took the moral responsibilities of Christianity seriously viewed their morality in the face of slaveholders' hypocritical and immoral actions as indicative of the slaves' dignity and moral superiority over their masters (Lyerly, 1998; Raboteau, 1978).

The following excerpts are indicative of the diversity of interpretations of Christianity by black Americans. The first is from Maria Stewart. Born in New England, Stewart moved to Boston with her husband and began public speaking after his death in 1829 (Pinn, 2002). Stewart was one of the first U. S. women to publicly lecture on political issues; not surprisingly, her speeches were often met by rude behavior and abrasive criticism, but Stewart was undeterred (Pinn, 2002). In the following excerpt, written while many blacks were still enslaved, Stewart expresses anger and frustration at the lack of blacks who “. . . never let their voices be heard, nor their hands be raised in behalf of tier color” (1833/2002, p. 69). In her speech: “An address delivered at the African Masonic Hall” (1833), Stewart implores blacks to take responsibility for their



racial uplift. Stewart, like many blacks interested in the betterment of black Americans, ponders the causes of black oppression. She reasons that African sinfulness resulted in enslavement. She states:

History informs us that we sprung from one of the most learned nations of the whole earth; from the seat, if not the parent, of science. Yes, poor despised Africa was once the resort of sages and legislators of other nations, was esteemed the school for learning, and the most illustrious men in Greece flocked thither for instruction. But it was our gross sins and abominations that provoked the Almighty to frown thus heavily upon us, and give our glory unto others. (Stewart 1833/2002, pp. 69-70)

Stewart admonishes black men to be virtuous, abstain from vice, and concern themselves with mental and moral improvement. She urges black men, not to wait for racial uplift, but to initiate it. She states:

It is of no use for us to wait any longer for a generation of well educated men to arise. We have slumbered and slept too long already; the day is far spent; the night of death approaches; and you have sound sense and good judgment sufficient to begin with, if you feel disposed to make a right use of it. Let every man of color throughout the United States, who possesses the spirit and principles of a man, sign a petition to Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, and grant you the rights and privileges of common free citizens; fir if you had faith as a grain of mustard seed (Matthew 13:31), long before this the maintain of prejudice might have been removed. (Stewart, 1833/2002, p. 72)

While Stewart attributes the original source of black oppression in America to sinfulness in Africa and places the onus of responsibility for racial uplift on blacks, she is highly critical of the system of slavery and attempts by whites to perpetuate it. Reasoning that black suffering in America was somehow pedagogical, Stewart declares that the necessity of such suffering is past. If whites continue to perpetuate black oppression, she suggests

they will face divinely-mandated wrath. Discussing the slave system in America, she states:

It appears to me that America has become like the great city of Babylon, for she has boasted in her heart . . . She is indeed, a seller of slaves and the souls of men; she has made the African drunk with the wine of her fornication; she has put them completely beneath her feet, and she means to keep them there; her right hand supports the reins of government and her left hand the wheel of power, and she is determined not to let go her grasp. But many powerful sons and daughters of Africa will shortly arise, who will put down vice and immorality among us, and declare by Him that sitteth upon the throne that they will have their rights; and if refused, I am afraid they will spread horror and devastation around. I believe that the oppression of the injured Africa has come up before the majesty of Heaven: and when our cries shall have reached the ears of the Most High, it will be a tremendous day for the people of this land; for strong is the hand of the Lord God Almighty. (Stewart, 1833/2002, p. 73)

Like Stewart, Henry Highland Garnet's *Address to the Negro Convention of Buffalo New York* (1843) places the onus of responsibility for liberation on black people. Garnet identifies the problem of black oppression as an errant interpretation of Christianity which has led blacks to docility and acceptance of oppression instead of resistance. Garnet's authorized violent resistance to slavery. For Garnet, those who first introduced Christianity to enslaved Africans presented only a mockery of the religion. He states:

Two hundred and twenty-seven years ago the first of our injured race were brought to the shores of America. They came not with glad spirits . . . They came not with their own consent, to find an unmolested enjoyment of the blessings of this fruitful soil. The first dealings they had with men calling themselves Christians exhibited to them the worst features of corrupt and sordid hearts; and convinced them that no cruelty is too great, no villainy and no robbery too abhorrent for even enlightened men to perform, when influenced by avarice and lust . . . (Garnet, 1843/1925, p. 151)

For Garnet, slavery stands in opposition to the will of God because it requires submission to whites instead of God. Thus, slaves who accept their enslavement without resistance, according to Garnet, are colluding in their own oppression and therefore guilty of sin. Because slavery prevents blacks from fulfilling their God-given obligations, it should be resisted at all costs. He argues:

TO SUCH DEGRADATION IT IS SINFUL IN THE EXTREME FOR YOU TO MAKE VOLUNTARY SUBMISSION (emphasis author's). The divine commandments you are in duty bound to reverence and obey. If you do not obey then you will surely meet with the displeasure of the Almighty. He requires you to love Him supremely, and your neighbor as yourself—to keep the Sabbath day holy—to search the Scriptures—and bring up your children with respect for His laws, and to worship no other God but Him. But slavery sets all these at naught, and hurls defiance in the face of Jehovah. The forlorn condition in which you are placed does not destroy your obligation to God. You are not certain of heaven, because you allow yourselves to remain in a state of slavery, where you cannot obey the commandments of the Sovereign of the Universe. . . . Your condition does not absolve you from your moral obligation. The diabolical injustice by which your liberties are cloven down, NEITHER GOD NOR ANGELS, OR JUST MEN, COMMAND YOU TO SUFFER FOR A SINGLE MOMENT. THEREFORE IT IS YOUR SOLEMN AND IMPERATIVE DUTY TO USE EVERY MEANS, BOTH MORAL, INTELLECTUAL, AND PHYSICAL, THAT PROMISES SUCCESS. (emphasis author's) (Garnet, 1843/1925, p. 153)

Garnet's Appeal distinguishes between false Christianity (as practiced by slaveholders) and true Christianity (that which mandates slaves to use all resources to liberate themselves). Such distinctions are common in black theology.<sup>18</sup> In the following excerpt, Frederick Douglass picks up on this theme of true Christianity versus false Christianity. In his text "On the Union, Religion, and the Constitution" (1847) Douglass

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<sup>18</sup> See for example Hopkins (1991) or Grant (1993) for an explanation of ways in which blacks distinguished between the false Christianity of their oppressors and the 'true' liberating meaning of Christianity.

discusses the criteria of both false Christianity and true Christianity. In short, false Christianity is unconcerned for the oppression of suffering masses while true Christianity liberates them. In the following passage, he explains the significance of true Christianity for the abolition. He writes:

I dwell mostly upon the religious aspect, because I believe it is the religious people who are to be relied on in this Anti-Slavery movement. Do not misunderstand my railing—do not class me with those who despise religion—do not identify me with the infidel. I love the religion of Christianity—which cometh from above—which is pure, peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of good fruits, and without hypocrisy . . . By all the love I bear to such Christianity at this, I hate that of the Priest and Levite, that with long-faced Phariseeism goes up to Jerusalem and worships, and leaves the bruised and wounded to die. I despise that religion that can carry Bibles to the heathen on the other side of the globe and withhold them from the heathen on this side—which can talk about human rights yonder and traffic in human flesh here. . . . There is another religion. It is that which takes off fetters instead of binding them on—that breaks every yoke—that lifts up the bowed down . . . It goes down after a long neglected race. It passes, link by link till it finds the lowest link in humanity's chain—humanity's most degraded form in the most abject condition. It reaches down its arm and tells them to stand up. This is Anti-Slavery—this is Christianity. (Douglass, 1847/1984, pp. 254-255)

In a later speech, *Speech at Rochester, July 5<sup>th</sup>, 1852*, Douglass expresses impatience with the collusion of many churches in black oppression. He ridicules arguments that those interested in racial betterment should sugar coat their message so as not to offend potential allies. Sarcastically, he states:

Would you have me argue that man is entitled to liberty? That he is the rightful owner of his own body? You have already declared it . . . How should I look today, in the presence of Americans, dividing, and subdividing a discourse, to show that men have a natural right to freedom? . . . To do so, would be to make myself ridiculous, and to offer an insult to your understanding.—There is not a man beneath the canopy of heaven that does not know that slavery is wrong for *him*. (Douglass, 1852/1925, p. 208)

In the following passage, Douglass succinctly draws connections between false Christianity (as then practiced in the U. S.) and black oppression. Detailing the components of such false Christianity, he states:

But the church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors. It has made itself the bulwark of American slavery, and the shield of American slave-hunters. Many of its most eloquent Divines, who stand as the very lights of the church, have shamelessly given the sanction of religion and the Bible to the white slave system. They have taught that man may, properly, be a slave; that the relation of master and slave is ordained by God; that to send back an escaped bondsman to his master is clearly the duty of all the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ; and this horrible blasphemy is palmed off upon the world for Christianity. (Douglass, 1852/1925, p. 215)

This diverse collection of excerpts represents the varying interpretations of Christianity which, in turn, framed the ways these authors understood themselves and the black experience in the U. S.

### **1865-1960**

The period from 1865 to 1960 provided opportunities for the perpetuation of religious traditions as well as religious innovation. After the Civil War, approximately four million ex-slaves were free to worship and organize their religious traditions by their own terms (Maffly-Kipp, 2000); some worshipped in the traditions they knew while others sought novel faith expressions. Northern black churches established missions in the south, resulting in a large growth of independent Southern black churches between 1865 and 1900 (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). Predominantly white churches also sponsored missions and opened schools for freed slaves (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). These schools increased the literacy rate of Southern blacks from approx. 5% in 1870 to 70% by 1900; a

major impetus for many freed slaves in attending these schools was the desire to be able to read the Bible for themselves (Raboteau, 1978).

Most freed slaves chose to join the independent African American churches (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). According to Maffly-Kipp (2000), hundreds of thousands of African Americans joined the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) and African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) churches after the Civil War. Additionally, in 1870 the Colored (now “Christian”) Methodist Episcopal Church was founded by indigenous southern black leaders and in 1894 African American Baptists formed the National Black Baptist Convention (Maffly-Kipp, 2000).

The large influx of northern churches and organizations to the South caused tensions to develop between southern and northern blacks (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). Northern blacks saw southern black worship as heathen and wanted ex-slaves to give up African remnants and embrace the more sedate and intellectual styles of religion practiced in the North (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). Southern blacks (many of whom had been forbidden to read during slavery) saw religion as an oral, emotional tradition; Northern blacks, on the other hand, felt true Christianity involved reading and understanding the Bible (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). These tensions are exemplified in the sermons of two black preachers, both popular during this third phase of black theological development—John Jasper (1878) and Roscoe Conkling Bruce (1905).

Jasper, who was born a slave, never fully learned to read. Nevertheless, he was a popular preacher who attracted crowds of both black and white listeners (Holifield, 2003). In 1867, he founded the Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia;

Jasper's church membership was almost 2,000 by the time of his death (Ross, 1996). In his 1878 speech entitled "*De Sun Do Move*," Jasper speaks in vernacular and discusses God's ability to alter nature when appropriate. While white listeners recalled Jaspers' emotional sermons as entertaining, blacks hearing this sermons likely received a more pointed message—that the system by which blacks suffered oppression could be destroyed at whim by God (Holifield, 2003). In the following passage, Jasper's sermon discounts scientific notions of the order of nature in favor of belief in God's ability to re-order nature and give victory to the oppressed. He states:

Joshwer stop de sun, but heer de Lord mek de sun walk back ten dergrees; an' yet dey say dat de sun stan' stone still an' nevr move er peg. It look ter me he move roun' mighty brisk an' is ready ter go ennyway dat de Lord ordurs him ter go. I wonder if enny uv dem furloserfers is roun' here dis arternoon. I'd lik ter take a squar' look at one uv dem an' ax him to 'splain dis mattur. He carn't do it, my bruthr'n. He knows a heap 'bout books, maps, figgers an' long bulwarks, but I derfy him ter take up Heze- kier's case an' 'splain it orf. He carn't do it. De Word uv de Lord is my defense an' bulwark, an' I fears not what men can say nor do; my Gord gives me de vict'ry. (Jasper, 1878)

In contrast to Jasper's sermon which downplays academic knowledge, the following sermon by Roscoe Conkling Bruce extols the values of formal education. Bruce's sermon is significant because it also speaks to the important role of black preachers (Raboteau, 1978) in directing the religious climate of the black community. In the following excerpt of his sermon entitled "Freedom through Education," Bruce (1905) contends that leadership of black churches should be limited to men with specific characteristics. He begins:

In cities the control of the church over the Negro's life needs strengthening if only for restraint of crime. Everywhere the elaborate ecclesiastical organization should be directed and represented by men of high character and keen intelligence. (Bruce, 1905/1925, p. 592)

Further in the passage, Bruce highlights the diverse spiritual needs of older blacks (who endured lived experiences of enslavement) and younger generations who were without this frame of reference. He continues:

The divergence in views and sentiments between the older and younger generations of Negroes expresses itself very pointedly in religious matters. The church must remain the House of God, but at the same time the preacher must enrich the formalities of religion not only with the sweet spirit of sociability but also with the serious interests of daily life. The church, as well as the school, must be a social center rich in interest if it is to exercise a reasonable control over the more vigorous elements in the community. (Bruce, 1905/1925, p. 592)

In his solution to bridging the disconnect between younger and older generations of blacks, Bruce reveals a conflict between formally uneducated preachers and formally educated ones.

The preacher faces a situation in which the utmost tact and intelligence and breadth of appreciation and power of leadership are requisite. Without unduly shocking the ingrained beliefs of the fathers, he must attach the religious sentiment to the moralities of common life. He must preach honesty, chastity, fidelity to contract, home-getting—the religion of character and thrift. How can such service be rendered by an illiterate?—a weakling? (Bruce, 1905/1925, p. 592)

In the South, the influx of Northern religious practices eventually diversified southern expressions of black religion (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). Traditional black evangelical customs were usually retained among poorer and more rural churches in the South; many



of these traditions (i.e. root work and specific musical systems) were inherited from the hush harbors of slavery (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). The gradual rise of an educated middle class of black people in the South resulted, however, in a loss of many traditional evangelical customs and the adoption of more uniform and codified religious practices (Maffly-Kipp, 2000).

In addition to tensions between formally and informally educated blacks, the third phase of black religious development also was marked by religious appropriation as well as religious innovation. As black Christians continued to search for meaning in their experiences of oppression in the U. S., some appropriated religious themes from predominantly white denominations. One salient theme was that of manifest destiny in which blacks in America would Christianize Africa, and thereby redeem the continent. This theme was appropriated from the Protestant notion of manifest destiny, through which God's people would bring about a magnificent new kingdom on Earth (Pinn, 2002).

Alexander Crummell's (1877) "The Destined Superiority of the Negro, a Thanksgiving Discourse" exemplifies this thematic appropriation of manifest destiny. Born to free parents in New York, Crummell was formally educated and ordained a priest of the Episcopal Church in 1844 (Pinn, 2002). Active in missionary endeavors to Africa, Crummell's sermon contends that blacks are chosen by God to develop Africa, using skills and resources gained through their North American experience. In this sermon, Crummell argues that God utilizes vengeance and chastisement in dealing with the peoples of the world. For Crummell, God's destructive vengeance is directed at nations

that are depraved and irredeemable, such as (according to Crummell) Native Americans and the indigenous population of New Zealand. He states:

Some peoples God does not merely correct; He destroys them. He visits them with deep and abiding shame. He brings upon them utter confusion. This is a painful but certain fact of Providence. . . . When I am called upon to account for all this loss of national and tribal life, I say that God destroyed them. And the declaration is made on the strength of a principal attested by numerous facts in sacred and profane history; that when the sins of a people reach a state of hateful maturity, then God sends upon them sudden destruction . . . Such was the condition of the American Indian at the time of the discovery of America by Columbus. The historical fact abides, that when the white man first reached the shores of this continent he met the tradition of a decaying population. (Crummell, 1877/2002, p. 113)

Crummell argues that God chastises some races of people in discipline, but also leads them to greatness. He contends that blacks in America are one such group of chosen people. Crummell argues that worthy characteristics of the blacks in America were also shared by other “sterling” races such as the Greeks and Romans. The preservation of such characteristics connotes chosen-ness. He continues:

The masterful nations are all, more or less, distinguished for vitality, plasticity, receptivity, imitation, family feeling, veracity, and the sentiment of devotion. These qualities may have been crude and unbalanced. They existed perchance right beside most decided and repulsive vices; but they were deeply imbedded in the constitutions of these people; and served as a basis on which could be built up a character fitted to great ends. (Crummell, 1877/2002, p. 116)

For proof of the chosen nature of blacks, Crummell argues that the experiences of slavery and oppression served to discipline blacks and develop their moral capacities—not destroy them. He states:

What else, I ask, can be the significance of the African slave-trade? What is the meaning of our deep thralldom [sic] since 1620? Terrible as it has been, it has not been the deadly hurricane portending death. During its long periods, although great cruelty and wide-spread death have been large features in the history of the Negro, nevertheless they have been overshadowed by the merciful facts of great natural increase, much intellectual progress, the gravitation of an unexampled and world-wide philanthropy to the race, singular religious susceptibility and progress, generous, wholesale emancipation, inclusive of millions of men, women, and children. This history, then, does not signify retribution; does not forecast extinction. It is most plainly disciplinary and preparative. It is the education which comes from trial and endurance; for with it has been allied, more or less, the grand moral training of the religious tendencies of the race. (Crummell, 1877/2002, pp. 120-121)

The preparation Crummell refers to is the Christianization of Africa.

In addition to blatant religious appropriations such as the above example, blacks also were a part of more novel expressions of the black Christian religion at this time.

These novel expressions are evidenced by the black holiness movement, the black Pentecostal movement, and Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement.

In 1895, Charles Harrison Mason began reviving and reorganizing the Pentecostal ministry (Armstrong, 2001). The results of his efforts was the formation of COGIC—the Church of God in Christ; followers of COGIC believe in the curative powers of prayer to heal the body (Armstrong, 2001). Born in Tennessee, Mason's parents had both been slaves. The family moved to Arkansas where Mason briefly attended Arkansas Baptist College before deciding that salvation could not be found in schools or colleges (Harvey, 1998). Although he received his preaching license as a Baptist, he began preaching holiness doctrines (i.e. doctrine of sanctification) and was rejected by his church (Harvey, 1998). After visiting the Azusa street revival in Los Angeles he reportedly saw a vision and spoke in tongues (Harvey, 1998). When he returned to Tennessee, he broke with his

holiness affiliation and established the Church of God in Christ in Memphis (Harvey, 1998). Mason traveled throughout the Mississippi Delta, preaching to and baptizing many blacks as they migrated North (Harvey, 1998).

More diversification in black religion occurred early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as blacks in increasing numbers migrated from the rural south to cities in the North and South (Baer, 1998). While many of the mainstream denominational churches attempted to accommodate the influx, most migrants felt more comfortable in smaller store-front and house churches that practiced holiness, Pentecostal (i.e. sanctified), spiritual, Islamic, Judaic, and other syncretistic faiths (Baer, 1998). Several of these groups will now be discussed in greater detail.

The Pentecostal movement came out of the Holiness movement prior to 1901 (Synan, 1997). Established by Charles F. Parham in 1901, the Pentecostal movement's connection to the black religious experience began when William Seymour attended Parham's Houston Bible School—but was only allowed to listen outside the door because he was black (Synan, 1997). Seymour, born to freed slaves in Louisiana, was removed from the parish he ministered after being taught by Parham and developing a belief that speaking in tongues was evidence of baptism by the Holy Spirit (Synan, 1997; Wikipedia, 2006b). He relocated to Los Angeles, California and began a ministry in a run-down building on Azusa Street that he named the Apostolic Faith Mission (Wikipedia, 2006b). The revival lasted from 1906-1909 and consisted of frequent, spontaneous, and ecstatic worship (Wikipedia, 2006b). Seymour endorsed a doctrine of salvation, holiness (sanctification), speaking in tongues as evidence of the Holy Spirit,

divine healing, and the proximate return to Earth of Jesus Christ (Wikipedia, 2006b). Seymour's ministry was significant because it endorsed racial unity and allowed women to obtain church leadership at a time when both racial segregation and patriarchal domination were prevalent; his ministry also is significant because through it, he established a world wide Pentecostal movement (Raboteau & Wills 2003; Synan, 1997). While some were skeptical of his teachings, others used them in their own congregations (Wikipedia, 2006b). Seymour's movement became known as Pentecostalism. Though initially interracial, the movement split along racial lines in 1924 (Wikipedia, 2006b). Segregated Pentecostals reconciled and formally unified in 1998 in Memphis, Tennessee, renaming themselves the Pentecostal/Charismatic Church of North America (Wikipedia, 2006b).

In 1919 Father Divine (George Baker) began the Peace Mission Movement that provided food, shelter, employment, and reformation for his followers (Armstrong, 2001). Known to his followers as Father Major Jealous Divine, the events of his life prior to 1914 are disputed. Most agree he was born George Baker in Georgia circa 1880. In 1899 he became the assistant of an itinerate preacher known as Father Jehovia; the two split after Divine amassed his own following in 1912 (Institute for the Study of American Religion, 1997). By 1914, Divine and his then all black followers moved to New York; sometime after 1920 the first white members joined his movement (Institute for the Study of American Religion, 1997). According to the tenets of the religion, Father Divine was the messiah and his coming fulfilled the prophecies of the New and Old Testament as the Second Coming of Christ and the Jewish Messiah (Armstrong, 2001). Divine's legend

began in 1931 when Divine, arrested for disturbing the peace, refused bail, pleaded not guilty and was summarily sentenced to one year in jail and a \$500 fine. Two days after Divine went to jail, the judge (apparently healthy) died; from his jail cell Divine suggested he had caused the judge's death (Institute for the Study of American Religion, 1997). In response to the depression, Divine moved his mission to Harlem in 1932; there he purchased hotels for member lodging and provided them with food and jobs (Institute for the Study of American Religion, 1997). He died in 1965, but the movement continued under the leadership of Mother Divine. The movement was noteworthy because it offered a comprehensive political, economic, and religious program intended to reform individuals and restructure society; it included followers of all racial backgrounds and promoted equality (Institute for the Study of American Religion, 1997). The movement also was noteworthy because it was extensively studied as a "cult" group; members live communally and all possessions are owned cooperatively (Armstrong, 2001; Institute for the Study of American Religion, 1997).

### ***Black Women's Volunteer Societies***

Another development which altered the practices of black theology was the emergence of volunteer societies among black middle class women. The emergence of black middle class membership throughout the U. S. prompted questions of black women's church participation (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). Some middle class black women with enough leisure time to devote to church politics found themselves rebuffed by male hierarchy (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). These women formed missionary societies for job training and for the funding of black missionaries to Africa (Maffly-Kipp, 2000). Like the

missionary societies formed by white women, black women's missionary societies allowed women access into the public sphere and provided them with useful information such as knowledge of social problems and world issues, practice in skills necessary for democratic participation, fundraising, and for those required to handle funds, financial management skills (Jeffrey, 2000). While most volunteer activity occurred in the North, moderate volunteer activity occurred in the south as well (Jeffrey, 2000). In the North, black women's volunteer activity was not limited to middle class blacks; free black women living in urban areas of the North formed volunteer organizations directed towards racial uplift in black communities (Jeffrey, 2000).

While such societies provided useful benefits to the people they served and to their members, they also perpetuated stereotypes of women and innately moral, virtuous, intuitive (instead of intellectual), and consequently well-suited for volunteer work (Jeffrey, 2000). Though there were black women at this time who did not embrace the cult of femininity<sup>19</sup> in many instances, black women embraced these essentialized notions for political reasons. Anna Julia Cooper's (1892) speech: "The Status of Woman in America" is evocative of such essentialized notions of femininity. In the speech, Cooper argues that black women are especially suited for moral discernment. Through their discernment, they can properly deal with the corruption of capitalism and lust of money that, for Cooper, plagued the nation at the time. She states:

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<sup>19</sup> One such woman was Ida B. Wells, who launched an anti-lynching campaign in the 1890's and argued that lynching served not only to terrorize blacks, but to constrain white women's sexuality (WGBH Educational Foundation, 1998)

In this period, when material prosperity and well earned ease and luxury are assured facts from a national standpoint, woman's work and woman's influence are needed as never before; needed to bring a heart power into this money getting, dollar-worshipping civilization; needed to bring a moral force into the utilitarian motives and interests of the time; needed to stand for God and Home and Native Land versus gain and greed and grasping selfishness. (Cooper, 1892/2002, p. 144)

Cooper's speech clearly plays to stereotypical notions of women's delicacy and virtue.

Yet, it must be remembered that for many black women the dominant theme was not one of delicacy. Black women's femininity was denied them by slavery as they were forced to perform heavy manual labor in the fields and also perform private sector duties. Thus for some black women, the invocation of Victorian ideals of femininity was politically necessary in order to subvert dominant themes of black women's inhumanity (Roseboro & Ross, 2006). By declaring that black women can stand for ". . . the happiness of homes" (p. 145), Cooper is arguably subverting notions of black women's inhumanity.

Still invoking feminine ideals, she continues:

Her kingdom is not over physical forces. Not by might, nor by power can she prevail. Her position must ever be inferior where strength of muscle creates leadership. If she follows the instincts of her nature, however, she must always stand for the conservation of those deeper moral forces which make for the happiness of homes and the righteousness of the country. In a reign of moral ideas she is easily queen. (Cooper, 1892/2002, p. 145)

Significant in Cooper's work is the recognition of black women's unique role in the matrix of domination. She makes it clear that black women's oppression is different from that of white women and black men; unlike white women or black men, black women face the ramifications of both racial oppression and patriarchy



(hooks, 1984). Cooper expresses the multiple and competing forms of oppression experienced by black women in the following passage. She states:

The colored woman of today occupies, one may say, a unique position in this country. In a period of itself transitional and unsettled, her status seems one of the least ascertainable and definitive of all the forces which make our civilization. She is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem, and is as yet an unknown or an unacknowledgeable factor in both. While the women of the white race can with calm assurance enter upon the work they feel by nature appointed to do, while their men give loyal support and appreciative countenance to their efforts, recognizing in most avenues of usefulness the propriety and the need of woman's distinctive cooperation, the colored woman too often finds herself hampered and shamed by a less liberal sentiment and a more conservative attitude on the part of those for whose opinion she cares most....as far as my experience goes the average man of our race is less frequently ready to admit the actual need among the sturdier forces of the world for woman's help or influence. (Cooper, 1892/2002, p. 145)

Yet for Cooper, the unique positionality of black women creates opportunities for human betterment. In the following passage, Cooper suggests that black women's experiences constitute God's "great push" designed to discipline them and facilitate their growth. Here Cooper's suggestion—that black women's experiences of oppression allow them to discern a truth hidden to others is illustrative of later womanist theological reflection.

Discussing black women's discernment of morality and truth she states:

One needs occasionally to stand aside from the hum and rush of human interests and passions to hear the voice of God. And it not unfrequently happens that the All-loving gives a great push to certain souls to thrust them out, as it were, from the distracting current for awhile to promote their discipline and growth, or to enrich them by communion and reflection. And similarly it may be woman's privilege from her peculiar coigne of vantage as a quiet observer, to whisper just the needed suggestion or the almost forgotten truth. (Cooper, 1892/2002, p. 147)

As the first year of World War I wore on, concerns in America logically connected with global concerns. Black Americans were not exempt from making these connections. The following excerpt by Alexander Walters is taken from a 1915 speech in which Walters attempts to connect the black experience in America with global concerns. In this speech, which thematically parallels Booker T. Washington's (1899) speech "The future of the American Negro,"<sup>20</sup> Walters argues that blacks were brought to the U. S. by Providence, so that whites could learn to treat blacks justly according to Christian principles and then spread Christianity around the globe. In short, Walters sees blacks as a sort of test case—an experiment in Christian democracy through which whites may perfect their democratic techniques before extending them to the world. Walters states:

America is the leader in present-day civilization. She leads in commerce, invention, education, religion, and social reform. She is given a wonderful opportunity to do service for God and humanity in taking the lead in solving the race problem on Christian principles. I am of the opinion that the purpose of God in allowing the black man to be brought to these shores and to become a part of this civilization was to prepare the white man, by contract, discipline, and education for world leadership in the spread of pure democracy and of the brotherhood of man. Equal treatment, fair treatment, just treatment of the darker races is the test of the white man's religion. When the white man can treat a Negro, Japanese, Chinaman, African, as a brother and accord him all the rights of a brother, that white man can pass—he is pure gold, and fit to lead any people and anywhere. (Walters, 1915/2002, p. 205)

Throughout the development of the U. S., racial oppression remained constant. Despite the locales that they resided in, their political affiliation, and to a large extent, their educational background, blacks in American continued to be denied social,

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<sup>20</sup> Washington (1899) argues that God brought blacks to the U. S. so that whites, through their dealings with blacks, might learn patience, forbearance, and supreme trust in God.

economic, and political opportunities. In the following excerpt: “The Faith of the American Negro” (1922), Mordecai Johnson articulates the faithfulness of black Americans in Christianity and democracy despite persistent racial oppression. Johnson’s oration is significant because it also touches on the factions of black Americans who tired of faithfulness to Christianity and/or democracy and pursued other avenues. He states:

Since their emancipation from slavery the masses of American Negroes have lived by the strength of a simple but deeply moving faith. They have believed in the love and providence of a just and holy God; they have believed in the principles of democracy and in the righteous purpose of the Federal Government; and they have believed in the disposition of the American people as a whole and in the long run to be fair in all their dealings...In spite of disenfranchisement and peonage, mob violence and public contempt, they have kept this faith and have allowed themselves to hope with the optimism of Booker T. Washington that in proportion as they grew in intelligence, wealth, and self-respect they should win the confidence and esteem of their fellow white Americans, and should gradually acquire the responsibilities and privileges of full American citizenship. (Johnson, 1922/1925, pp. 658-659)

In the following passage, Johnson chronicles the factions of black Americans that, for a variety of reasons, have tired of being faithful to traditional avenues for black liberation. Instead these factions have placed their hope in Marxism or black nationalism, respectively. He continues:

Some of our young men are giving up the Christian religion, thinking that their fathers were fools to have believed it so long . . . One group among us repudiates entirely the simple faith of former days. It would put no trust in God, no trust in democracy, and would entertain no hope for betterment under the present form of government. It believes that the United States Government is through and through controlled by selfish capitalists who have no fundamental good-will for Negroes or for any sort of laborers whatever . . . Another and larger group among us believes in religion and believes in the principles of democracy, but not in the white man’s religion and not in the white man’s democracy. It believes that the creed of the former slave States is the tacit creed of the whole nation, and that the

Negro may never expect to acquire economic, political, and spiritual liberty in America . . . (Johnson, 1922/1925, p. 661)

Johnson maintains that the majority of black Americans do not belong to the fore-mentioned factions. Instead, the majority remain faithful, yet frustrated because they have yet to receive the economic, social, or political advantages guaranteed them as American citizens. Here Johnson foreshadows the thematic thrust of the Civil Rights movement as he argues that the condition of blacks in America will not improve unless public policy is enforced to guarantee the rights of all American citizens. He continues:

Whatever one may think of these radical movements and their destiny, . . . they are home-grown fruits, with roots deep sprung in a world of black American suffering . . . The larger masses of the colored people do not belong to these more radical movements. They retain their belief in the Christian God, they love their country, and hope to work out their salvation within its bounds. But they are completely disillusioned. They see themselves surrounded on every hand by a sentiment of antagonism which does not intend to be fair. They see themselves partly reduced to peonage, shut out from labor unions, forced to an inferior status before the courts, made subjects of public contempt, lynched and mobbed with impunity, and deprived of the ballot, their only means of social defense. They see this antagonistic sentiment consolidated in the places of power in the former slave States and growing by leaps and bounds in the North and West. They know that it is gradually reducing them to an economic, political, and social caste. And they are now no longer able to believe with Dr. Booker T. Washington, or with any other man, that their own efforts after intelligence, wealth, and self-respect can in any wise avail to deliver them from these conditions unless they have the protection of a just and beneficent public policy in keeping with American ideals. (Johnson, 1922/1925, pp. 661-662)

***Bishop “Sweet Daddy” Grace***

During the 1920’s and 30’s, Bishop Charles Manual “Sweet Daddy” Grace gained fame as the charismatic founder of the United House of Prayer for All People of the Church of the Rock of Apostolic Faith; Grace claimed to have curative powers and

invoked an evangelic style of preaching that encouraged ecstatic worship (Raboteau & Wills, 2003). Born Marceline Manuel De Graca in Cape Verde, Africa in 1881, his family immigrated to Massachusetts where he eventually Americanized his name to Charles Manual Grace (BookRags, 2005). Though baptized in the Roman Catholic faith, Grace gravitated to the holiness movement within Protestant worship (BookRags, 2005). He opened his first House of Prayer in 1919, with himself as bishop. Known for its eschatological focus and group baptism (eventually carried out by fire hose in the streets), the church quickly expanded into twelve states in the south and west (BookRags, 2005).

Grace's flamboyance (i.e. long hair, painted fingernails, brightly colored apparel, be-jeweled fingers, and entourage) contributed to his popularity and criticism and likely helped his church expansion (BookRags, 2005). While Grace originally performed healings (BookRags, 2005; Raboteau & Wills, 2003) he later encouraged believers to perceive the curative power of their own faith. As he aged, his church participation decreased to the point of simply making appearances; consequently, few records of Grace's sermons exist (BookRags, 2005). Financially, Grace exhibited great skill. Using church donations, he built a corporate empire for the church; he purchased several manufacturing businesses that generated church income and eventually expanded to real estate investment. Grace purchased the headquarters of Father Divine's Peace Mission Movement and evicted him in 1938 (BookRags, 2005). Church confusion after Grace's death in 1960 led to the formation of at least one splinter group; the main body of the church under the new leadership of Walter McCollough was a multi-million dollar organization with almost one hundred Houses of prayer nationwide (BookRags, 2005).

Under McCollough's leadership, the church focused on issues of social justice and eschatology (BookRags, 2005). Through Grace's social and financial vision, and McCollough's redirection of the church toward mainstream black religion, the House of Prayer has been very successful; it continues to thrive in the present.

Some black religious expressions that developed during this time were not based exclusively on Christianity, yet still influenced many in the black community. One such religious expression is the Nation of Islam. The Nation of Islam was founded by Elijah Poole (Muhammad) in 1931 in Detroit, Michigan and blended teachings from Christianity, the Islamic faith, freemasonry, and other New Age religious movements (Raboteau & Wills, 2003). The Nation of Islam focused on black oppression and during its formation, equated Satan and evil with the white race (Armstrong, 2001). In the 1950's Malcolm X was appointed as the national spokesman for the Nation of Islam; he left in 1964 when he converted to traditional Islam (Armstrong, 2001).

In the early 1940's, World War II initially granted a reprieve to blacks suffering from racial oppression (WGBH Educational Foundation, 1998). More than 2 ½ million black men and thousands of black women found themselves in the service of the war effort (National Atomic Museum, 2003). They faced widespread discrimination and were often forced into segregated working conditions, yet many served with distinction and honor (National Atomic Museum, 2003). As in the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and World War I, the irony of blacks defending the ideals of a nation that blatantly disregarded their humanity was painful. One black theologian who addresses these issues is Pauli Murray.

Among her many accomplishments, Murray (who received a law degree prior to obtaining her divinity degree) was the first black deputy attorney general (male or female) of California, the first black person to receive the Doctor of Juridical Science degree from Yale in 1965, and the first black woman priest in the Episcopal Church in 1977 (Pinn, 2002). In the following essay, Anna Pauli Murray (with Henry Babcock) eloquently speaks to the complications arising when blacks fight for democracy—namely that they are also implicitly fighting for the white supremacy that will inevitably continue to be used against them. Murray and Babcock, who proposes pacifism as an alternative to violence, detail these complications in the following essay entitled “An Alternative Weapon” (1942), they write:

For the American Negro pacifist, both the confusion, and the courage required to work one's way through it to the way of non-violence, are intensified. He has always lived under the crushing heel of racial supremacy. He has experienced the feel of this heel, he has felt himself pushed down to a subhuman status, he has known how this force seeks to keep him there. But he is told that if this country suffers military defeat, Hitlerism and its demonic race theory would become the national official policy rather than a sporadic or ingrown sectionalism adhered to by an all too large minority of misguided white Americans. He is told this and he knows that his fate is tied with the fate of democracy and freedom, as fumbling, blind, and stupid as some aspects of that democracy are when applied to him... Yet he also knows that after he has pulled white supremacy out of the fire, he may be sent back to the race ghettos to starve and despair. He knows that even now, as he is called upon to save democracy, democracy can find no democratic place for him in the fight to save it . . . (Murray & Babcock, 1942/2002, p. 218)

The era from 1865 to 1960 reflects elements of religious inclusion as well as exclusivity; the shift towards global concerns and commonality that was begun during this period would be refined during the Civil Rights Movement. Raboteau and Wills (2003) suggest that during this period of time, the focus shifted away from orthodox

religious practices back to African tradition; focus also was extended to global concerns and awareness of the commonality among all persons of color. As in the previous era, black religious figures during this time also were concerned about black oppression.

### **1960-1999**

This era of black theological discourse represents a qualitative shift from previous eras. Rather than public addresses or sermons, the discourses in this period are more academic, in the sense that they are comprised largely of works by scholars of black theology. This shift was brought on by various historical and cultural developments that created civil and political unrest and, in so doing acted as catalysts for new ways of thinking about black theology.

Important events in the 1950's placed civil rights at the forefront of black American issues. In 1954, for example, the U. S. Supreme Court overturned the long-standing doctrine of separate but equal in *Brown v. Board of Education*, ruling that segregated schools were not permissible (McElrath, 2006). The civil unrest that followed school integration attempts increased with the murder of Emmett Till, the organization of the Montgomery bus boycott, and the arrest of Rosa Parks in 1955 (McElrath, 2006). By 1957 the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) was organizing non-violent protests against the still rampant racism and discrimination against blacks in the US. By 1960 the sit-in conducted by four NC A&T State University students in Greensboro, NC had sparked similar sit-ins throughout cities in the South (McElrath, 2006). Civil rights unrest nationally and political unrest abroad with the Vietnam conflict created a turbulent climate in the U. S.



Religiously, many African Americans espoused belief in a coming racial apocalypse within which white Americans would suffer violent retribution for their sins against blacks (Raboteau & Wills, 2003). Other black American beliefs that emerged during this phase identified blacks as the true descendants of the ancient Hebrews (Raboteau & Wills, 2003). In this phase of black theology like the preceding stages, many writings converge on interpretations and responses to black suffering. This phase differs, however, in that it realized—especially through the work of James Cone,<sup>21</sup> the establishment of black theology as an academic discipline. With the institutionalization of black theology, the dissemination of black religious discourse was facilitated among scholars of black theology. As such, these works are often marked (either implicitly or explicitly) by thematic continuations of or responses to, other contemporary works of black theology. The markedly different nature of the excerpts in this section requires an alternative approach to their presentation. Because a majority of the sources are derived from book chapters and in some cases entire books, summaries will be provided of the thematic thrust of each work before the excerpts are presented. These discussions will be organized by decade.

### ***1960's***

***Howard Thurman.*** Philosopher, ordained Baptist minister, and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman became the first black dean of Boston University in 1925 (Wikipedia, 2006d). Thurman traveled extensively, headed Christian missions and was acquainted

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<sup>21</sup> Cone is recognized as the father of academic black theology (Pinn, 2002); Cone's (1969) *Black Theology and Black Power* and (1970) *A Black Theology of Liberation* were the first published works on liberation theology (Hopkins, 1999)

with Gandhi (Pinn, 2002; Wikipedia, 2006d). In 1944 Thurman helped establish the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, the first racially integrated and intercultural church in the U. S. (Wikipedia, 2006d). A prolific writer, many of Thurman's works address issues of human pain and suffering. Given the tumultuous nature of the early 1960's, it should be no surprise that the following excerpts by Thurman (originally published in 1963), also deal with the nature and purposes of suffering.

Specifically, Thurman focuses on ways suffering can bring individuals a deeper understanding of their purpose in life and relationship to God. Thurman contends that suffering—a universal and therefore an inescapable fact of life for humans—can result in negative and positive outcomes. Negatively, suffering may result in humiliation of the individual and destruction of her/his spirit; positively it can facilitate transformation. He argues that “Openings are made in a life by suffering that are not made in any other way.” (p. 238). Such openings can lead to spiritual reinforcement.

For Thurman, individuals who suffer can enter into a “fellowship of suffering” by joining with a community of sufferers (1962/2002, p. 239). Thurman argues that such fellowship does not lessen suffering, but it allows the sufferer to gain perspective by understanding his or her suffering as inclusive of other people. In addition to fellowship with other sufferers, individuals also can gain sustenance through fellowship with Christ. Thurman writes:

For many Christians, the sense of the presence of the suffering Christ, who in their thoughts is also the suffering God, makes it possible through his fellowship to abide their own suffering of whatever character. To know him in the fellowship

of His suffering is to be transformed by the glory of His life, and for these individuals this is enough—in His name they can stand anything that life can do to them. This is the resource and the discipline that comes to their rescue under the siege of pain. (1962/2002, p. 240)

Thurman argues that suffering can bring about individual interior development by forcing individuals to confront issues of life and death and in so doing discover the meaning and purpose of life (i.e. God). Thurman contends that individuals suffer as part of the experience of freedom and part of the growth of life. Essentially, suffering allows each person to experience the meaning of death. He writes:

The ultimate logic of suffering, of course, lies in the fact of death. The particular quality of death is to be found in what it says about the future. Death is a denial of the validity of the future. This is the logic of all suffering. It is what rallies the spirit and girds man to do battle . . . All religions, since man began his pilgrimage on the planet, have been forced to deal with this central issue: they must answer the challenge of the end of man's life. . . . Life and death are the experience of living things, and here Life in some sense becomes identical with God. To say that man is driven to a face-to-face encounter with Life and its Creator, out of whom come life and death as experiences in Life. Death is seen as being an experience within Life, not happening to Life. (Thurman, 1962/2002, p. 242)

When the individual who confronts her or his own death and discovers God, Thurman contends that she or he finds confirmation that her/his life and death are both contained within God. Discussing this confirmation, Thurman writes:

I believe that such confirmation of life in us is the work of the Holy Spirit of God. For me, the love of God nourishes and confirms us and gives to us the assurance that, because life in all its vicissitudes is contained in Him, in Him we have the sense of ultimate finality in existence that makes total existence, and our life in it, purposeful and meaningful. I cannot escape the necessity of concluding that the answer to suffering is to be found in experiencing in one's being the meaning of death. To state it categorically, it is to have one's innermost self or persona assured that the finality of death, which is the logic of all suffering, is itself

contained in a more comprehensive finality of God Himself . . . This means that, at any point in human history, no event in the life of a single person can be separated from what are, in fact, the ends of God. (Thurman, 1962/2002, p. 244)

Such confirmation, according to Thurman, renders questions about evil and undeserved suffering merely “academic.” Thurman argues that the suffering individual is ultimately concerned with managing her or his suffering. Thurman contends that for such reassurances/confirmation, philosophy and religion can assist but cannot sustain and confirm the individual—only the human spirit can do this. Through confirmation the individual can face his suffering and manage it rather than be ravaged by it. Thurman concludes:

If the answer to his suffering is to force it and challenge it to do its worst (244) because he knows that when it has exhausted itself it has only touched the outer walls of his dwelling place. This can only come to pass because he has found something big enough to contain all violences, violations—he has found that his life is rooted in a God who cares for him and cultivates his spirit, whose purpose is to bring to heel all the untutored, recalcitrant expressions of life. Such a man knows that he cannot determine what may befall him, either as a child of nature, as a child of his time and age, or even as a child of God. He knows that suffering, the ultimate logic of which is death in life, is a part of the living stuff of his earthly adventure. He knows that even in his own strength he never quite explores the limits of his endurance, and beyond all this there is the possibility of a reinforcement of his life that transcends all the vicissitudes of his fortune and shares in a collective destiny in which God is all and in all. (1962/2002, pp. 244-245)

**Joseph Washington.** Joseph Washington, Jr.’s book *The Politics of God* (1967) was published in the same year Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Declaration of Independence from the War in Vietnam” was published in Ramparts magazine and one year after Huey Newton and Bobby Seale founded the Black Panther party in Oakland, California

(McElrath, 2006). The continued unrest in the U. S. expressed itself in acts of violence and expressions of disillusionment. Amidst this backdrop Washington, who had been employed as a minister, dean, and professor of theology, argued that America's hope for salvation lay in authentic black religion, which was compatible with the dominant theme of Christianity—reconciliation. Washington contrasts authentic black religion with “white folk's religion.” Washington describes white folks religion as demonic and contends that it stands in direct contradiction to reconciliation and the Kingdom of God (p. 254). For Washington, the hope for America's reconciliation lies in black religious structures because they contain principles of brotherhood and equality—principles that for Washington, white religion has rejected. He writes:

The only radical human challenge to white folk religion and its social-cultural establishment is the Negro. The element of reconciliation has been primary in the genuine religion of the Negro folk. They joined it with the democratic creed. Both have been at the heart of the Negro folk . . . (Washington, 1967/2002, p. 254)

For Washington, black religion holds the theme of Christianity constant and also endorses the democratic creed. Washington says black religion developed out of black suffering. Because of the persistent suffering of black people and their remaining true to Christianity in spite of their suffering, Washington contends that black people are chosen; as such their suffering is redemptive. He writes:

Freedom and equality with and for all—Negro folk religion—is the genius of the Negro folk. Developed out of an elite breakthrough of its minority but the suffering of its majority, it parallels the genius of religion and democracy rooted in biblical faith. As a result of this suffering by a whole people for four centuries and place in the perspective of the Bible, we contend here that the Negro cannot

be understood or understand himself except as another “chosen people.” By their stripes may all be healed. (Washington, 1967/2002, p. 254)

For Washington, the lack of awareness black people have about their chosen-ness paradoxically serves as proof of their chosen status. In contrast to evangelical Puritans who, Washington contends, were self-appointed to a manifest destiny and thus not chosen, blacks do not claim chosen status and in fact are chosen people. Washington argues that true suffering servants have no escape hatch—this is what separates true chosen people from self-proclaimed chosen people. He states:

The fact that Negroes do not perceive themselves as the people chosen by God to be His suffering servants for the “transgression” of all God’s people in America, if not elsewhere, is a positive rather than a negative sign of chosen-ness. In this the Negro is markedly different from the Anglo-Puritans who settled this nation in the conscious belief that it was the “promised land” and that they were specifically “chosen people . . .” (Washington, 1967/2002, p. 255)

The task set for black Americans, Washington argues, is to free the black race, the white race, and then the world through reconciliation, exemplified through interracial sexual togetherness. Speaking of the task of black Americans Washington writes: “For God has called the Negro people to an infinitely more complex and responsible task—not only of being released from bondage but of releasing its captors from their shackles as well” (p. 256). Further in the passage he speaks specifically of the global task of black Americans. He states: “. . . the Negro is called to be the servant whereby all nations, not just America, will be redeemed . . . The mission of the Negro must be to unify mankind through acceptance of differences as blessings rather than punishment” (p. 259).

Washington argues that the period of black enslavement and resulting emancipation was not the end, but the beginning of the event binding black people with whites and with the world. In the following excerpt, Washington discusses the physical realization of reconciliation (i.e., sexual togetherness). He writes:

God has called the Negro as the “suffering servant,” whereby mankind the world over will consciously, not accidentally, voluntarily, not by force as in times past, affirm first in principle and then in practice a life of full human oneness through the only biblical way of real knowing. Sexual togetherness is in the Bible the fullest expression of knowledge and union. (Washington, 1967/2002, p. 257)

Blacks will lead conscious affirmations of “full human oneness” through sexual knowing. Through their suffering (i.e. the offering for the sin of racial separateness) unity will be realized. Washington argues:

All mankind is in a state of deprivation and the Negro is the servant of release from this bondage of human separateness—this deprivation—being as he is externally the most deprived, though neither by his will or his doing can he undo the calling as “an offering for sin.” (1967/2002, p. 258)

Believing reconciliation will not likely be achieved without bloodshed, Washington critiques Martin Luther King Jr.’s nonviolence movement as a narrow-minded (white) reading of the Bible. Washington argues that redemption is incomprehensible apart from bloodshed.

Insofar as the Martin Luther King, Jr. non-violent technique dominates through calling men to bleed in social action for the purpose of a hamburger and calling them back from bloodshed in social intercourse, it is guided by faithlessness in God and distortion of the “suffering servant” mission. Moreover, King has followed the white rational line of white folk ethics which is steeped in white folk interpretation of the New Testament ignoring its unity with the Old Testament. It

is true that the New Testament demand is *katallagete*, but the key to being reconciled is not the Apostle Paul but his Master—Jesus, whose unbreakable link is with the Old Testament and in the death of Jesus Christ, incomprehensible apart from the offering of blood. Christ was the true sacrifice—not of materialism or ideas, but of his very life and blood. The Christian faith means nothing if it does not mean sacrifice. (Washington, 1967/2002, p. 261)

Although Washington is confident of the black American's mission, he questions whether blacks will accept their chosen task. Washington states that some blacks have forgotten Negro folk religion in their preoccupation with the Civil Rights movement. By interpreting freedom as the achievement of middle class status some blacks, he argues, have failed to answer the call of God to free humanity for the Kingdom of God. He ponders:

The question is whether the people of God called Negroes can be faithful to their folk religion and still consciously accept their mission. Will the Negro choose to be what he is, "suffering servant," the source of power, or fatalistically acquiesce in suffering, if not exploit if for personal gain rather than group salvation. (Washington, 1967/2002, p. 264)

For Washington, the suffering of black Americans is to be celebrated; blacks are the instrument by which the world will be redeemed. Washington implies that blacks should gladly make this sacrifice. He writes:

The Negro's seemingly undeserved punishment is his opportunity to release all men from the sin of in-groupness. The "curse" of being Negro is really the blessed symbol of God's paradoxical instrument and the means of His grace for all men. The inescapability from being black and its accompanying inhumane treatment by white humans is to be cherished and used for the purpose of God and not despised through the prejudices of men. (Washington, 1967/2002, p. 267)



*Martin Luther King, Jr. Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community*

(1967) was published one year before Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 had been passed, followed by increases in overt act of racism and riots in urban areas (King, 1967). Also during this time, the Vietnam conflict continued and much public sentiment in the U. S. was anti-war, prompting King to speak out publicly against the war. With rioting in many urban cities and persistent racism despite the advances of the Civil Rights movement, some blacks began embracing the black power movement instead of the non-violence King advocated.

King's book is a response to these issues; it provides a candid analysis of black and white responses to the civil rights movement. A central thesis of this work is that blacks and whites understood the civil rights movement in contrary ways. For whites, the civil rights movement was a project to establish decent treatment of blacks, not equality; for blacks, who believed in the promises of U. S. democracy, the civil rights movement was understood as a project of social, economic, and political equality. After blacks attained more humane treatment and persisted in attempts at equality, a 'white backlash' ensued. King describes these conflicting views of the civil rights movement in the following passage. He writes:

When Negroes looked for the second phase, the realization of equality, they found that many of their white allies had quietly disappeared. The Negroes of America had taken the President, the press and the pulpit at their word when they spoke in broad terms of freedom and justice. But the absence of brutality and unregenerate evil is not the presence of justice. To stay murder is not the same thing as to ordain brotherhood. The word was broken, and the free-running expectations of the Negro crashed into the stone walls of white resistance. The result was havoc. Negroes felt cheated, especially in the North, while many whites felt that the

Negroes had gained so much it was virtually impudent and greedy to ask for more so soon. (p. 4)

*Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* is then an attempt to deconstruct the above situation, explicate its consequences (i.e. white backlash and black power), and articulate personal, structural, legal, and programmatic solutions that will enable the U. S. and the world to move past racism and the economic exploitation it spawned.

A major focus in King's work is the explication of the black power movement, which for King, developed from the frustration of black non-violence in the face of persistent white resistance. King acknowledges the positive aspects of black power—the movement encourages blacks to gain political and economic strength to achieve their goals provides a psychological call to manhood for black men spiritually wounded by racial segregation, and an opportunity to 'glory in blackness' (p. 40) and honor the African past. Despite these beneficial aspects of the black power movement, King argues that it is ultimately a desperate project, lacking hope and as such is incompatible with the goals of the civil rights movement. He writes:

Beneath all the satisfaction of a gratifying slogan, Black Power is a nihilistic philosophy born out of the conviction that the Negro can't win. It is, at bottom, the view that American society is so hopelessly corrupt and enmeshed in evil that there is no possibility of salvation from within. Although this thinking is understandable as a response to a white power structure that never completely committed itself to true equality for the Negro, and a die-hard mentality that sought to shut all windows and doors against the winds of change, it nonetheless carries the seeds to its own doom. (King, 1967, p. 44)

King (1967) argues that the desperation of the black power movement is insufficient to sustain a revolution and that black power precluded the cooperation between blacks and whites necessary for social transformation. In his disavowal of the violence accepted in the black power movement, King re-affirms his commitment to non-violent coercion as a morally acceptable tool for social transformation.

Much of King's book is devoted to a candid discussion about white racism and white Americans' responsibility for the status of blacks in the U. S. Discussing white resistance to change and the resulting white backlash against civil rights advances King writes:

Ever since the birth of our nation, white America has had a schizophrenic personality on the question of race. She has been torn between selves—a self in which she proudly professed the great principles of democracy and a self in which she sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy. This tragic duality has produced a strange indecisiveness and ambivalence toward the Negro, causing America to take a step backward simultaneously with every step forward on the question of racial justice . . . The step backward has a new name today. It is called the 'white backlash.' But the white backlash is nothing new. It is the surfacing of old prejudices, hostilities and ambivalences that have always been there. It was caused neither by the cry of Black Power nor by the unfortunate recent wave of riots in our cities. The white backlash of today is rooted in the same problem that has characterized American ever since the black man landed in chains on the shores of this nation. The white backlash is an expression of the same vacillations, the same search for rationalizations, the same lack of commitment that have always characterized white America on the question of race. (1967, p. 68)

King argues that American slavery, rooted in U. S. economic development, profoundly impacted the social, legal, and political structures of the U. S.; the doctrine of white supremacy was created to justify slavery and white morality while Christianity was used to further justify white supremacy. Given this long history of inequality, King

argues that many whites are more comfortable maintaining the status quo rather than committing to equality.

In order to be true to the democratic impulse of the American psyche, King argues that national support be provided for the war on poverty, efforts be made to increase the dignity of the poor, and social programs be created for the eradication of poverty. While King places the onus of responsibility on whites for ending the race problem, he believes whites cannot achieve this goal in the absence of non-violent coercion for change. He writes: “. . . every ethical appeal to the conscience of the white man must be accompanied by nonviolent pressure” (p. 129). Additionally, King states that the church, once a collaborator in racism, must be a voice for equality and take the lead in social reform.

King holds all of society responsible for social transformation, ending racism, and eliminating poverty. He writes: “No great victories are won in a war for the transformation of a whole people without total participation. Less than this will not create a new society; it will only evoke more sophisticated token amelioration” (p. 20). Yet while all share responsibility for change, blacks, according to King, must bear the greater burden. He writes:

After 348 years racial injustice is still the Negro’s burden and America’s shame. Yet for his own inner health and outer functioning, the Negro is called upon to be as resourceful, as productive and as responsible as those who have not known such oppression and exploitation. *This is the Negro’s dilemma* (emphasis author’s). He who starts behind in a race must forever remain behind or run faster than the man in front. It is enough to cause the Negro to give up in despair . . . And yet there are times when life demands the perpetual doing of the impossible. The life of our slave forebears is eternal testimony to the ability of men to achieve the impossible. (King, 1967, p. 120)

Further in the chapter, King re-articulates the need for blacks to rise above their circumstances and lead the movement for social transformation. Blacks can, according to King, be the impetus for a more compassionate and humane United States. Describing the unique capabilities of blacks to accomplish these goals he writes:

We are superbly equipped to do this. We have been seared in the flames of suffering. We have known the agony of being the underdog . . . We must have a passion for peace born out of wretchedness and the misery of war . . . So in dealing with our particular dilemma, we will challenge the nation to deal with its larger dilemma . . . This is the challenge. If we dare to meet it honestly, historians in future years will have to say there lived a great people—a black people—who bore the burdens of oppression in the heat of many days and who, through tenacity and creative commitment, injected new meaning into the veins of American life. (King, 1967, p. 134)

**Albert Cleage.** Ordained in the Congregational Church in 1943, Albert Cleage first pastored at an integrated church in San Francisco (Pinn, 2002). In 1951 he went to St. Marks Presbyterian mission, but soon ran into disagreements with white church leaders over his leadership; in 1953 Cleage and some of his followers left the church to form Central Congregation Church where they ministered and provided programs for the communities poor (The Faith Project, 2003). By the 1960's, Cleage, influenced by the black nationalist movement, began to espouse a more radical approach to civil rights (The Faith Project, 2003). In 1967 he initiated the Black Christian National Movement (later renamed the "Shrine of the Black Madonna" and began re-interpreting Jesus' teachings relevant to the political and socio-economic needs of the black community (Pinn, 2002). Amidst racial unrest in Detroit, Cleage published *The Black Messiah* in 1968. His work is significant because its central theme of a black God who is involved in the liberation of

blacks in the U. S. was later integrated into a systematic theology by James Cone, resulting in the birth of academic black theology.

In the following excerpt from this work, Cleage argues that God is on the side of the oppressed who must actively seek out their liberation. Cleage further argues that Eurocentric gospel interpretations hid God's/Christ's identification with black people's struggle for freedom (Pinn, 2002). Black's are, for Cleage, God's chosen people; he argues that blacks continue to suffer in America because of faithlessness (i.e. they are not proactive in the freedom struggle).

Cleage's sermon deals specifically with biblical accounts of Israel's attempts to enter the Promised Land and their reluctance to make necessary sacrifices. Cleage draws a parallel between Israel's wandering in the wilderness and black people's experience in America as "shepherds in the wilderness" (p. 275). For Cleage, acceptance of black oppression is an indication of faithlessness. He writes:

. . . the people who accept oppression, who permit themselves to be downtrodden, those people are faithless because God did not make men to be oppressed and to be downtrodden. And many times a man faces the choice between living as a slave and dying as a man. And when we choose to live as slaves, we are faithless and our children will be shepherds in the wilderness. (Cleage, 1968/2002, p. 276)

Cleage focuses on the national unrest and resulting legislative attempts to suspend laws regulating police search and seizure as part of governmental attempts to curb violence. Cleage chronicles the violence against blacks in America and argues that present attempts to control violence are hypocritical. He states:

I would like to suggest that crime in the streets didn't just start in Watts two years ago. Crime in the streets is not something new in these United States. Crime in the streets is part of the American tradition. It is part of the American way of life. Why, all of a sudden, are people concerned about crime in the street? (Cleage, 1968/2002, p. 276)

Cleage's sermon strongly criticizes black people for not taking responsibility for their own liberation. He argues that through cowardice, interest in self-preservation, and lack of faith in their own power, blacks in America have colluded in their own racial oppression. He argues:

For more than one hundred years we permitted this kind of thing to happen. That was our faithlessness. We let it happen! They could go into the middle of a black community and take a black man out and lynch him. They would often round up black people from miles around, and make them watch. That was our faithlessness. And that is what God is talking about. Our children shall be shepherds in the wilderness and shall suffer for our faithlessness. (Cleage, 1968/2002, p. 278)

Cleage argues that blacks in the U. S. must be cleansed of their tendencies towards cowardice and self-interest before they can enter the Promised Land. The duration of their suffering, then, must be understood as a time of learning and atonement.

Responding to followers who argue that blacks have suffered enough and should be allowed to enter the Promised Land now, Cleage states:

God cannot wipe out our weakness and faithlessness to each other. We must make amends for more than one hundred years. For every moment of cowardice, when our grandfathers hid under their beds while black men died, there has to be a moment of courage before we can dare think about entering the Promised land . . . We can't enter the promised land like this. There's too much blood on us. We still carry the mark of slavery. (Cleage, 1968/2002, p. 278)

In preparation for leaving the wilderness, Cleage argues that the black community must create a program that allows blacks to be “a black nation in the middle of the white man’s world” (p. 279). Cleage suggests that such a programmatic thrust would promote self-determination, manifested through black control over education, the police, economics, and politics. He chronicles difficulties in building the black nation in the following excerpt.

Today our basic task consists of bringing together a Nation, bringing together black men, women and children with courage, who believe in themselves and who love each other. This means that we must conquer individualism. We must realize that our strength, our power, our hope, everything that we dream of, lies in our coming together. We will wander in the wilderness until we find a way to unite as one people. (Cleage, 1968/2002, p. 279)

### ***1970’s***

***James H. Cone.*** James Cone is considered to be the father of academic black theology (Pinn, 2002). His theology laid the foundations for a formal black theology movement that addressed themes of black oppression and liberation (Raboteau & Wills, 2003). James Cone’s *God of the Oppressed* (1975) represents a crystallization of his earlier works in black theology—*Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970)—because it rearticulates themes in the first two works in response to criticisms of both. In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone argues that connections exist between the experiences of oppressed blacks in America and religious truth (Pinn, 2002). Cone contrasts the western theological tradition, which for Cone, engages religion as a “spectator sport,” with the black religious perspective that is grounded in experiences of slavery and racial oppression.



Cone takes the issue of black suffering seriously. He emphasizes that the pain of black suffering is real and discusses Christian and non-Christian responses to this suffering. Cone chronicles various non-Christian responses to black suffering (i.e. black humanism, reliance on non-Christian religions, and political engagement), but contends that for the majority of blacks such responses do not reflect their lived experiences. Most black Christians, according to Cone, understand God as primary for making meaning and fostering liberation out of black life in white society. For Cone, then, black Christians are faced with a paradox. Their faith in God as liberator of the oppressed seemingly contradicts their persistent oppression in North America.

Thus, Cone uses the rest of this chapter to tease out answers to the paradox of black suffering in ways that honor the sovereignty of God and the horrific nature of black suffering. Cone chronicles appeals to divine Providence by black preachers of the past to explain black suffering in America but says this appeal is inadequate. He argues that appeals to the mystery of God's sovereignty are helpful, but fail to provide complete answers to the question of black suffering. Cone also discounts black humanist attempts to adequately deal with black suffering, but contends that William Jones, author of *Is God a White Racist* was correct in arguing that no observable proof existed to support the claim that God sides with the oppressed. Cone writes:

Nevertheless, William Jones is right! There is no historical evidence that can prove conclusively that the God of Jesus is actually liberating black people from oppression . . . In responding to Jones, Christian theologians have to admit that their logic is not the same as other forms of rational discourse. . . . There is the experience of suffering in the world, and no amount of theological argument can explain away the pain of our suffering in a white racist society. But in the

experience of the cross and resurrection, we know not only that black suffering is wrong but that it has been overcome by Jesus Christ. (1975, p. 191)

Cone attempts to counter arguments that black religion emphasizing the suffering of Jesus encourages passivity. For Cone, such beliefs encouraged oppressed blacks to “express visions of freedom in a situation of servitude” (p. 192). Cone argues that the idea that Jesus made blacks passive is simply a misreading of the black religious experience. He argues that it was knowledge of God/Jesus that gave enslaved blacks the knowledge that they were divinely created for freedom. He writes:

To be sure, they could not rationally explain why they were slaves or why God permitted them to suffer so much. The meaning of black suffering remains a part of the mystery of God’s will. But the presence of Jesus in their social existence did reveal that God was at work liberating them from bondage. (Cone, 1975, p. 192)

Though taking pains to emphasize the terrible nature of black suffering, Cone argues that black suffering also is good when undertaken in the liberation struggle. Such suffering, he contends, is a sign of God’s presence breaking into history. Blacks are then called to suffer as a way of redefining their humanity in the fight for freedom. He writes:

But suffering that arises in the context of the struggle for freedom is liberating. It is liberating because it is a sign of Jesus’ presence in our midst. Black people, therefore, as God’s Suffering Servant, are called to suffer with and for God in the liberation of humanity. This suffering to which we have been called is not a passive endurance of white people’s insults, but rather, a way of fighting for our freedom. (Cone, 1975, p. 193)

### *1980's*

*Cornel West. In Prophecy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (1982), Cornel West develops a seemingly eclectic interpretive framework for judging the appropriateness of Black responses to white supremacy. For West, a defining characteristic of the Black experience in the U. S. has been and continues to be responses to the white supremacy that is part of the social and institutional fabric of the United States. He writes:

The Afro-American encounter with the modern world has been shaped first and foremost by the doctrine of white supremacy, which is embodied in institutional practices and enacted in everyday folkways under varying circumstances and evolving conditions. (West, 1982, p. 47)

West develops his Afro-American religious philosophy from elements of prophetic Christianity, American pragmatism, and progressive Marxism. West's *Prophecy* will be discussed in detail to adequately convey the comprehensive and unorthodox nature of his analytic framework. For West, prophetic Christian thought in its unadulterated form presents a fundamentally democratic notion of “. . . a transcendent God before whom all persons are equal” (West, 1982, p. 16) and who desires the social and existential well-being of every person regardless of sex, class, race, caste, etc. West argues that prophetic Christian thought also subscribes to a belief in the dignity and depravity of human beings—the inevitable gap between individual possibilities for hope and transformation and individual lived realities as fallen, imperfect beings. The dialectic between human dignity and depravity results for West in the possibility for humans to improve but never perfect their lived realities. This dialectic makes democracy and

accountability requisite for any prophetic Christian social vision so that the masses can participate “. . . in the decision-making processes of institutions that regulate and govern their lives (West, 1982, p. 18). West argues that through democratic participation, the tendency toward human depravity is checked and individuals are provided opportunities to pursue individual and community well-being.

West’s religious philosophy utilizes elements of American pragmatism and progressive Marxism to frame his understanding of the purpose of philosophy as a tool for understanding history in ways that improve life in the present. For West, American pragmatism provides a specific way of understanding the purpose of knowledge. Knowledge claims, according to this paradigm, “. . . are secured by the social practices of a community of inquirers, rather than the purely mental activity of an individual subject” (West, 1982, p. 21). Such a framework eschews notions of the given and rejects the idea that knowledge is objective.

Knowledge, for West’s purposes, is based on the cultural and political norms of the black community that are subject to change when the needs of the community change. West adds to this framework the Marxist emphasis on class struggle and in-depth social analysis. He uses this framework to re-interpret the history of the black experience (through a de-mystification of the development of white supremacy in the U. S.) in order to ameliorate social and existential conditions for blacks in the present.

Utilizing this interpretive framework, West identifies black responses to white supremacy as either furthering or detracting from black social, political, and economic liberation (i.e. the enhancement of black self-image and self-determination) and black

existential liberation—the receipt of divine grace that sustains blacks in the struggle for earthly liberation and which ultimately grants relief from existential suffering (West, 1982).

West's classification of black responses to white supremacy is based on four traditions: (a) exceptionalist, which contains knowledge claims that either ontologically or sociologically support black superiority (e.g. divine chosen-ness, genetic, sociological, cultural, or behavioral superiority) and distinctiveness, especially from white Americans; (b) assimilationist, whose knowledge claims present black American culture to be ontologically and/or sociologically pathological; (c) marginalist, whose knowledge claim critiques the ways in which black American culture suppresses individuality and discourages non-conformity; and (d) humanist, which makes no claims about black genetic or sociological superiority/inferiority but instead “. . . accents the universal human content of Afro-American cultural form” (West, 1982, p. 71) by focusing on ways black American cultural expression shares themes with other racial, ethnic, and national groups. West's classification provides a useful heuristic for organizing elements of black theology around themes of black economic, social, political, and existential well-being.

West's work represents both a departure from and a connection to the work of earlier black theologians. Importantly, West's work overcomes the essentialized notions of good and evil that were prevalent in earlier eras of black theological development. West's chapter “A Genealogy of Modern Racism” identifies the development of white supremacy as a confluence of culture, history, science, pseudo-science, and classic revivalism that encouraged the emergence of white supremacy and the cultural ideals and

social norms it spawned. By identifying white supremacy as a cultural-historical development rather than a genetic condition of whites in America, West's analysis affords the possibility, albeit unlikely, of altering present social and economic realities. Additionally, West's analysis represents an advancement over earlier black theological discourse because it delineates what black liberation will look like relevant to the lived experiences of black people and connects black liberation to the larger reality of the liberation of poor people of the world.

The theological advances of West's work notwithstanding, he also retains more traditional notions of black theology. Like the theology of James Cone, West retains in his religious philosophy the paradoxical notion of a God who is at the same time historically present and transcendent and who sides with the oppressed against oppressors in their liberation struggle. Like Cone, West also argues that such a divine figure will ultimately bring about existential salvation. He writes:

Ultimate triumph indeed depends on the almighty power of a transcendent God who proleptically acts in history but who also withholds the final, promised negation and transformation of history until an unknown future. (West, 1982, p. 96)

West argues that the prophetic Christian prospective cannot (and need not) be validated or justified beyond its ability to encourage ways of understanding the world that help one effectively cope with the unavoidable limit situations of human existence. It is within this context that West defines human history as the 'realm of the pitiful and the tragic' (1982, p. 17). He writes:

The pitiful are those who remain objects of history, victims manipulated by evil forces; whereas the tragic are those persons who become subjects of history, aggressive antagonists of evil forces. Victims are pitiful because they have no possibility of achieving either penultimate liberation or ultimate salvation; aggressive antagonists are tragic because they fight for penultimate liberation, and in virtue of their gallant struggle against the limits of history they become prime candidates for ultimate salvation. In this sense, to play a tragic role in history is positive: to negate and transform what is, yet run up against the historical limits of such negation and transformation, is candidacy for transcending those limits. (West, 1982, p. 18)

Thus for West, like Washington, King, Cleage, and Cone before him, tragedy and suffering are transmuted to positive ends. For West, such suffering becomes the criteria for otherworldly reward.

**J. Deotis Roberts.** J. Deotis Roberts is a Baptist preacher who has researched, preached, and lectured globally; he has greatly influenced black theology and has expanded its scope to concerns of cross-cultural, international, and inter-religious issues (Pinn, 2002). Like the other black theologians discussed in this phase of black religious development, Robert's also concerns himself with issues of black suffering. Roberts' take on suffering differs from all previous theologians, however, in that it incorporates themes of both reconciliation and liberation and also addresses issues of globalization. In so doing, Roberts like West, presents a response to black suffering that also is inclusive of other local and international forms of oppression.

Like Cone's *God of the Oppressed*, Roberts essay is an exploration in theodicy—an attempt to explain suffering in ways that affirm the goodness of God and the reality of undeserved suffering. It is important for Roberts that the integrity of both God and the sufferer be maintained when exploring the problem of suffering (Pinn, 2002). In this

book chapter, "Faith in God Confronts Collective Evils," Roberts (1987) criticizes the majority of Euro-American theologians who, for him, have largely ignored the problem of undeserved suffering. Roberts argues that humans are doomed to experience "animal pain" due to the constraints of the physical body and the natural environment. Roberts says that ethically, there are no easy answers to the sources of evil (in a world that God created good) that produce innocent suffering; there are only responses to suffering. For Roberts, the faith response that centers around "God's redemptive work in Christ." (p. 307) is the best response.

Roberts conceptualizes humans as co-sufferers and co-laborers with God and argues that through a faith-response, suffering can be transmuted for constructive ends. He states: "The Easter story, rightly understood, enables us to engage evil and suffering, transmute it for constructive ends, and move forward in hope to God's future and ours" (Roberts, 1987/2002, p. 307).

Roberts emphasizes that one can call attention to undeserved suffering without questioning the goodness of God by focusing on free moral agency. Theology, in this sense, is not absolute, but is purposefully directed by the goodness of God and the reality of human suffering. He continues:

Could not God have made human beings irresponsible and unfree, morally speaking? Doesn't God possess the power to contradict logic and ethics as understood by finite minds? To suggest such a possibility about God makes us uncomfortable. But to transcend logic and ethics does not and should not necessarily require contradiction. We have a sense that God embodies the best that we know as finite persons and yet baffles our ability to comprehend fully. In other worlds, we may know in part, but we do not know. We see through a glass darkly, but we do see. Theology should direct us to the place where faith



possesses reasonableness and certitude even if certainty is not within our grasp. (Roberts, 1987/2002, p. 305)

Even though human knowledge about the origins of evil is limited, Roberts argues that much evil, results from abuses of freedom (i.e., possessing the knowledge and freedom to choose and act, one deliberately chooses the lesser good). This is Roberts' explanation of individual evil. He contends:

Much moral evil can be explained through God's self-limitation in order to create beings who are both free and morally responsible. Much suffering is present in our personal lives because of the perversion of our nature. Freedom is abused and we have not been responsive or responsible as co-creators with God. We are endowed to scale angelic heights, but we have sunk to diabolical depths. Much of the answer we seek is in the recovery of the creative purpose of human life in the design of God. (Roberts, 1987/2002, p. 308)

When confronted with undeserved suffering, Roberts suggests that faith in God becomes a resource for dealing creatively with suffering when such faith leads to commitment to values and goals of ultimate concern. Such faith, however, is not provided by "one-dimensional" manifestations of religion (i.e. exclusive focus on personal salvation without regard for others' suffering, short-sighted projections of God as the author of one's success, complete reliance on human achievement, and emphasis on biblical inerrancy). Roberts discusses two of these limited conceptualizations of religion and their consequences in the following passage. He writes:

For some Christians, personal salvation is the solution to everything. This is undergirded by a sentimental Jesusology and biblical inerrancy. There is nothing wrong with spiritual formation, the deepening of the inner life, or a radical personal conversion. But this answer is inadequate, because the conception of both sin and salvation is limited. The trouble with the simple view of the gospel is

that it is unaware or ill-equipped to deal with the difficult questions that human beings face in this world. This type of gospel can easily become demonic when it is preached to people who are undergoing gross suffering, deprivation, and injustice. If one is privileged, this gospel can also serve diabolical ends. When the Christian God is understood as the author of success and pride of race, religion becomes destructive both to its advocates and to its victims. (Roberts, 1987/2002, p. 310)

Roberts also raises concern over issues of globalization. He points out connections between racism in the U.S. and economic issues abroad that all impact our “global village” in ways that make the realization of local, national, and global reconciliation necessary for the relief of suffering (p. 311). As such, attempts to eradicate instances of suffering must transcend racial, ethnic, gender, local, national, and international borders. Roberts states:

Our approach to human rights must be broader than the Christian covenant. It must be interfaith, interreligious, interethnic, and intercultural. It must be based upon mutual respect for the equal dignity of people, something like the cosmopolitanism of the Stoics which influenced the development of the natural law-natural rights tradition in the West. Our dignity must now be inherent in our humanity. This affirmation could be undergirded by the ethics from the great religions, but not dependent upon them for its validity. According to our confession, Christians should lead the way. (1987/2002, p. 313)

*Deloris Williams.* Within the debate over black oppression and liberation, issues of gender and class also developed. Thus at the same time Black theology was developing, Womanist theology (though not termed as such at the time) also was emerging (Raboteau & Wills, 2003). With the 1983 publication of Alice Walker’s *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens*, many black Christian women found inspiration and appropriate terminology for their unique theological reflections which differed in kind

from white feminist theology and black theology. Known for her specific articulations of womanist theology, Deloris Williams emerged in the late 1980's as, arguably, one of the most well-known womanist theologians. In the following excerpt, Williams (1987) discusses what was then the emergent discipline of womanist theology. She writes:

What then is a womanist? Her origins are in the black folk expression “You acting womanish,” meaning, according to Walker, “wanting to know more and in greater depth than is good for one—outrageous audacious, courageous and willful behavior.” A womanist is also “responsible, in charge, serious.” She can walk to Canada and take others with her. She loves, she is committed, she is a universalist by temperament. Her universality includes loving men and woman, sexually or nonsexually. She loves music, dance, the spirit, food and roundness, struggle, and she loves herself. “Regardless.” Walker insists that a womanist is also “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.” She is no separatist, “except for health.” A womanist is a black feminist or feminist of color. Or as Walker says, “Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.” Womanist theology, a vision in its infancy, is emerging among Afro-American Christian women. Ultimately many sources—biblical, theological, ecclesiastical, social, anthropological, economic, and material from other religious traditions will inform the development of this theology. (Williams, 1987, p. 1)

In application, womanist theology attempts to deconstruct the suppressed role of black women in the church and the larger society (Thomas, 1998). Additionally, Womanist theology asserts the inherent power in women, with which they can resist oppression (Williams, 1993).

### *1990's*

During the 1990's, womanist theology experienced tremendous growth. In addition to veteran voices such as Katie Cannon and Deloris Williams, a second generation of womanist theologians emerged and broadened the content of womanist

reflection to include not only sin, ethics, and survival but also biblical interpretation and issues of sexuality.<sup>22</sup>

A significant contribution of womanist theology has been its ability to provide an internal critique of black theology. By articulating both the ways in which black religion has served to help and hinder black women's liberation, womanist theology provides a space within which positive change can occur. The following passage by Deloris Williams highlights the dual role the church has served for black women—as a source of both healing and hurt. She writes:

I realize my theological preoccupation with faith seeking understanding cannot romanticize black women's Christian faith. I cannot ignore how this faith has also been shaped by a process in black and white communities that I recognize as "colonization of female mind and culture." Nor can I ignore the fact that the African American denominational churches, in their patriarchally and androcentrically biased liturgy and leadership, have been primary agents of this mind-culture colonization with regard to black women. Yet the churches have also been psychosocial places where black women could find some relief from the terrible burdens in their lives . . . This means, then, that the African-American denominational churches function like two-edged swords. They sustain black women emotionally and provide "theological space" for black women's faith expressions. But they suppress and help to make invisible black women's thought and culture. Through their uncritical use of the Bible and through their patriarchal theology, many of the African-American denominational churches prohibit black women from asking many critical questions about women's oppression and about the support and reinforcement of that oppression by the Bible and by the Christian church in all its male dominated forms. (Williams, 1993, p. xiii)

Through its critical questioning of patriarchal church practices, social policy, and even biblical passages, womanist theologians have created a space for once-marginalized voices in black theology.

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<sup>22</sup> See for example Emilie Townes' (Ed.), *A Troubling in my Soul* (1993) and James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore's (Eds.), *Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume Two: 1980 – 1992* (1991).

Other changes to black theology occurred during the 1990's include the increased growth of black Catholics and blacks identifying with the Eastern Christian traditions (Raboteau & Wills, 2003). In 1990, Archbishop George Stallings, Jr. founded the Imani Temple Catholic Church after claiming that the orthodox Catholic Church was racist and failed to be adequately inclusive to African Americans (Armstrong, 2001). Though modeled after the orthodox Catholic church, the Imani Temple allows women to be ordained and provides optional celibacy for priests (Armstrong, 2001). Also during this time, the black Baptist and Methodist denominations that once dominated black religion were surpassed in membership by Holiness and Pentecostal churches such as C.O.G.I.C.—the Church of God in Christ (Raboteau & Wills, 2003). The diversity of these religious expressions is indicative of the broad range of religious interpretations blacks in the U. S. have constructed.

### **Conclusion**

While the articulations of black theological reflection presented in this chapter are not representative of the entirety of black theological discourse, their diversity nonetheless reveals the absurdity of attempts to narrowly define the project known as 'black theology.' Black Nationalist, womanist, pacifist, globalist, and pragmatic are but a few of the diverse perspectives articulated in this chapter. While all of these articulations were developed in response to black oppression, to make additional meaningful comparisons among these works is difficult. For example, Mordecai Johnson's (1922/1925) call for effective public policy to ensure citizenship rights of blacks, Pauli Murray's and Henry Babcock's (1942/2002) call for black pacifism, and Cornel West's

(1982) combination of prophetic Christianity and progressive Marxism resist all but the most broad comparison—that each of these works is ultimately concerned with alleviating black suffering.

However, theological articulations presented in this chapter do share broadly recurring themes such as appropriations of the biblical Exodus motif (Cleave, 1968/2002; Cone, 1975; Jones, 1808/2002), distinction between false and true Christianity (Douglass, 1847/1984; Garnet, 1843/1925; Washington, 1967/2002), the idea that blacks must actively resist oppression and participate in their liberation (Garnet, 1843/1925; King, 1967; Stewart, 1833/2002; Walker, 1829), the belief that God desires black freedom and/or God is actively involved in the liberation of black people (Cone, 1975; Cleave, 1968/2002; Garnet, 1843/2002; Hammon, 1787/2002; Jasper, 1878; Jones, 1808/2002; “Othello,” circa 1808/1925; Paul, 1827/1925; Stewart, 1833/2002), and the notion of redemptive and/or pedagogical suffering (Cone, 1975; Crummell, 1877/2002; Jones, 1808/2002; Stewart, 1833/2002; Thurman, 1963/2002; Walters, 1915/2002; Washington, 1967/2002; West, 1982) even though they vary widely in content.

Given both the diversity and commonality evidenced in these articulations, what conclusions can be drawn about ‘black theology’? Perhaps the greatest commonality of these works is that each was developed in response to specific historical contingencies that shaped the author’s understanding of the social construction of blackness<sup>23</sup> and the subsequent religious responses to black oppression each author articulated (Hill, 1999).

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<sup>23</sup> The social construction of race, including blackness, is presupposed here. What it means to be black is determined by the social, historical, and cultural contingencies of the author (i.e., the ‘black identity’ articulated in the 1960’s differs markedly from black identity as articulated in the 1990’s).

Just as there are multiple and competing forms of blackness (Anderson, 1995; Hill, 1999), there also are multiple and competing articulations of black theology.

Still, the recurrence of themes relevant to the pedagogical or beneficial nature of black suffering merit closer scrutiny given the libratory intent of this book. For all of the diversity in religious expression discussed in this chapter, most of the texts share reliance on two concepts: the goodness of God in relation to blacks and the very real suffering of black people. The discourse presented in this chapter, particularly the discourse from 1865 forward appears to struggle between those concepts—the affirmation of an all-powerful God that loves blackness and the reality of radical black suffering. Given these constraints, it is understandable that black theologians have resolved tensions around these two ideologies through an assertion of the pedagogical nature of black suffering.

Thus Absalom Jones (1808/2002) had few alternatives but to suggest that U. S. slavery ultimately benefited the will of God for the betterment of Africa. What conclusions could Maria Stewart (1833/2002) draw about black suffering except that it was (originally) pedagogical? That Alexander Crummell (1877/2002) interpreted the decimation of Native Americans and indigenous New Zealand populations as acts of Providence and that Booker T. Washington and Alexander Walters (1915/2002) both interpreted the condition of black oppression in the U. S. as similarly providential should not be surprising given the fore-mentioned ideological constraints on black theology?

Beginning in the 1960's, the theme of black chosen-ness also became dominant in the black theological texts presented in this chapter. Not surprisingly, however, chosen-ness involved undergoing more black suffering. For Joseph Washington (1967/2002),

black suffering was to be 'cherished' because it demonstrated both a chosen status and a responsibility for blacks to ". . . be the servants whereby all nations not just America, will be redeemed . . ." (Washington, 1967/2002, p. 259). At the same time, Martin Luther King, Jr. (1967) argued that blacks held a greater burden of responsibility for social change. While not employing the explicit language of chosen-ness, King nevertheless invokes the spirit of black chosen-ness when he states that blacks are especially equipped to bear the brunt of responsibility for social transformation because they ". . . have been seared in the flames of suffering" (King, 1967, p. 134).

As he transcended theological boundaries to create what became the foundation for black theology as an academic discipline, James Cone (1975) also ironically limited the discipline's ability to articulate new visions of liberation through his retention of fore-mentioned themes of black chosen-ness and providential suffering. This theme also is apparent in the work of Cornel West (1982) who, although arguably one of the most profound intellectuals of this century, also found it necessary to retain the notion that suffering of the oppressed (in the interest of social transformation) is beneficial.

The recurrence of the chosen-ness/providential black suffering theme raises concerns. To the extent that such discourse remains prevalent in contemporary black theological texts, the liberatory potential of such texts to ameliorate black suffering and ultimately all suffering is questionable. If black suffering is presented as beneficial and black people are presented as divinely chosen for suffering, from where does the impetus come to relieve suffering? If one attempts to relieve divinely mandated black suffering, does this act constitute a violation of the will of God? Finally, what are the psychological



implications of being divinely mandated to suffer in order to save the world? The following chapter will analyze select contemporary black theological texts in an effort to explore these questions relevant to the goals of social justice.

### CHAPTER III

#### TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF SELECT BLACK THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze the arguments set forth in the theological discourses of five purposefully chosen black theologians whose texts are concerned with black liberation. The intent of this analysis is to respectfully interrogate the selected texts to identify the meta-narratives they employ. Where oppressive meta-narratives are found, the intent is to push against these boundaries of theological interpretation in order to increase their libratory possibilities.

#### **James H. Cone: *God of the Oppressed* (1975)**

The first work to be analyzed is James Cone's (1975) *God of the Oppressed*. Subsequent texts to be analyzed in this chapter are organized historically and include M. Shawn Copeland's (1993) "Wading through Many Sorrows: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective"; Cornel West's (1993a) "Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of Capitalist Civilization"; Jacquelyn Grant's (1993) "The Sin of Servanthood: And the Deliverance of Discipleship"; Jacquelyn Grant's (1999) "Servanthood Revisited: Womanist Explorations of Servanthood Theology"; and Anthony Pinn's (2004) "Embracing Nimrod's Legacy: The Erotic, the Irreverence of Fantasy, and the Redemption of Black Theology." These works (subsequent to Cone's seminal work) were purposefully chosen because they are indicative of the diversity among black theological themes and also because their discourses, though temporally

separated from *God of the Oppressed*, exhibit clear linkages and/or responses to themes presented in Cone's (1975) work.

Analysis in this chapter employs an abbreviated method of deconstructive analysis. The original method of deconstructive analysis created by Jacques Derrida is an elaborate process of textual analysis that focuses on the etymology of words, their connotations, and denotations, in order to demonstrate the derivative and unstable structure of the text (Stafford, 2004). A complete rendering of Derrida's deconstructive method lies beyond the scope of this chapter; the abbreviated method of deconstruction employed here does, however, remain faithful to the intent of Derrida's deconstructive method—the identification of logical weaknesses within texts to create spaces for the hearing of previously silenced voices (Caputo, 1997; Stafford, 2004). Textual deconstruction for the purposes of this chapter will be limited to analysis of binary oppositions, marginalized voices (i.e., groups whose interests are not served by the dominant reading of the texts), implicit meta-narratives or ideological assumptions (i.e., modes of thought considered originary, given, or natural within the text), and the implications of these elements for black liberation. A deconstructive analysis of *God of the Oppressed* follows.

*God of the Oppressed* (hereafter GOTO) was a seminal work for black theology because it deconstructed the taken for granted marriage of white racism and Christianity that had long been used as a tool of control and pacification against black Americans. Cone argued in GOTO that white racism was antithetical to the 'true' meaning of the gospel; his black theology of liberation effectively demonstrated how oppressed blacks

could be both black (in a political sense) and Christian at the same time (Evans, Jr. 1993; Hopkins, 1999). Although there were black theologians before Cone who reflected on the relationship between black American oppression and Christianity, none so systematically identified the social a priori that gave rise to white Christian racism in America.

Consequently, Cone is recognized by most contemporary black theologians as integral to the formation of black theology as an academic discipline (Earl, Jr., 1993; Hopkins, 1993, 1999; West, 1993a). For this reason, Cone's work is the first to be deconstructed in this chapter.

In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone links his knowledge of classical theology to the black experience in America in so doing, argues that black theology is faithful to the central theme of gospel—Jesus Christ's active involvement in the liberation of the oppressed (i.e. black Americans). Much of GOTO elaborates on the relationship between social context and theology. For Cone, one's social context frames the way theological problems are conceptualized and responded to. Cone refers to the social context as a "social a priori"—a mental sieve which distinguished between relevant and irrelevant theological data (Cone, 1975).

Although Cone's understanding of the social a priori is largely derived from a sociology of knowledge framework, he extends the framework to a novel conclusion. Cone argues that theology, regardless of whom it is articulated by, is highly particularized. Though presumed to be universal Cone argued that American theology (i.e. white Christian theology) actually was ideologically biased towards a Eurocentric worldview. Cone's systematic analysis of white American Christianity was important

because it created a space for the justification of another particularized form of god-talk (i.e., black theology) to be heard. Thus, Cone's formulation effectively challenged the dominance and presumed universal nature of white Christian theology. (Earl, Jr., 1993; Walker, Jr., 1993).

Cone's work was liberatory for some black Americans because it aligned their political interests with Christian gospel. Yet, as this analysis will demonstrate, the knowledge claims set forth in his book are necessarily constrained by the context of racism, patriarchy, and domination that GOTO critiques. GOTO culminates in a virtual inverted hierarchy of what was presumed to be given in white American Christian theology. This inversion is accomplished through Cone's employment of binary oppositions to differentiate (a) black and white social a priori, (b) black theology from white theology, (c) black Americans from white Americans, and (d) black salvation from white salvation. These binaries will now be discussed.

### ***The Social A Priori in Black and White***

For Cone, the existence of the social a priori did not mean black and white Americans had different interpretations of reality, it meant that black Americans' social position as oppressed in America afforded them a True understanding of the gospel and white Americans' social position guaranteed their perpetual misinterpretation of the gospel.

Cone identifies the white social a priori as being shaped by white socio-political interests that are aligned with the advantaged class (Cone, 1975). For Cone, this social a priori was rooted in Enlightenment thought that ". . . failed to question the consequences

of the so-called enlightened view as reflected in the colonization and slavery of that period” (1975, p. 47) and therefore misinterpreted the gospel according to white values. Consequently white theologians failed to see the necessary connections between race/ethnicity and theological discourse. Cone states: “Again, it is obvious that because white theologians were not enslaved and lynched and are not ghettoized because of color, they do not think that color is an important point of departure for theological discourse” (Cone, 1975, p. 53).

In contrast to the white social a priori, the black social a priori was shaped by extreme experiences of oppression; black experiences of slavery essentially kept black theological reflection honest because it prevented sharp distinctions between the gospel and black theological interpretations (Cone, 1975). Cone argues that black Americans daily toil as slaves left them little leisure time for philosophical discussions of God’s validity or ontology. Referring to the links between black oppression and black theology he states:

Such were not their philosophical and theological problems as defined by social reality. Blacks did not ask whether God existed or whether divine existence can be rationally demonstrated. Divine existence was taken for granted, because God was the point of departure for their faith. The divine question which they addressed was whether or not God was with them in their struggle for liberation. (Cone, 1975, p. 55)

Moreover, blacks understood God as a historical rather than a metaphysical reality. This understanding of God as breaking into history encouraged, according to Cone, blacks to struggle for freedom in the physical world. Cone writes:

While white preachers and theologians often defined Jesus Christ as a spiritual Savior, the deliverer of people from sin and guilt, black preachers were unquestionably historical. They viewed God as the Liberator in history. That is why the black church was involved in the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century and the civil rights movement in the twentieth. Black preachers reasoned that if God delivered Israel from Pharaoh's army and Daniel from the lion's den, then he will deliver black people from American slavery and oppression. (1975, p. 57)

While white theology had the luxury of addressing abstract theological concerns, the black experience in America necessitated a concern with the real and with God's presence in their lived experience. For Cone, this concern with the real provided an appropriate lens through which black Americans discerned divine partiality for the oppressed (i.e. black Americans).

For Cone, Christ's relation to culture is not general, but specific, with partiality for the oppressed. White Americans social a priori as oppressors necessitated that their theological reflection was in fact heretical; by colluding in black oppression white theology ran counter to God's partiality for the poor and God's desire that their oppression be relieved. In so far as whites clung to their white theology and white values, Cone argued that they positioned themselves in opposition to God. In short, Cone's analysis suggests that Christ is for African Americans and against whites. Cone discusses the divine opposition to white culture in the following passage:

. . . if the biblical Christ is the Liberator of the oppressed from the sociopolitical bondage inflicted by the oppressors, then can it be said that Jesus Christ relates to both cultural expressions in the same way? Of course not! The biblical Christ stands in opposition to all cultural expressions that have their point of departure in human slavery. (Cone, 1975, p. 90)

***Whiteness as Evil, Blackness as Good . . . and Bad***

White American values then, come to signify badness or evil that oppresses African Americans. Cone specifically refers to the evil of white Americans in relation to their failure to put into practice their biblical knowledge. He states: “Black people learned a long time ago that there is no connection between education and Christian living. That much they picked up from observing white people who intellectually knew much about God but whose behavior made them the children of the devil” (Cone, 1975, p. 214).

Just as Cone essentializes white American theology, white culture, and whiteness as oppressive and evil, he signifies black theology and the black experience as oppressed and good. In opposition to the evil of whiteness, blackness is goodness embodied by Christ. Indeed, he argues that Christ, the ultimate representation of goodness, is black.

Cone describes his justification for the blackness of Christ as follows:

Christ’s blackness is both literal and symbolic. His blackness is literal in the sense that he truly becomes One with the oppressed blacks, taking their suffering as his suffering and revealing that he is found in the history of our struggle, the story of our pain, and the rhythm of our bodies . . . Christ’s blackness is the American expression of the truth of his parable about the Last Judgment: “Truly, I say to you, as you did not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me” (Matt. 25:45). The least in America are literally and symbolically present in black people. To say that Christ is black means that black people are God’s poor people whom Christ has come to liberate. (Cone, 1975, p. 136)

***Blackness as Good, Blackness as Election***

In GOTO, oppressed black Americans alone have the appropriate social a priori to discern the liberating truth of the gospel (Cone, 1975). They are thus called into service for the purpose of liberating humanity. Cone writes:



Because the phrase 'all are oppressed' can be understood only from the perspective of the poor, only they are in a position to take seriously the universal dimension of the gospel of liberation. This places an awesome responsibility upon them, for when the dialectic of oppression and liberation is seen correctly, the oppressed recognize that their call is to be God's "Kingdom of priests" to all peoples of the earth. Election involves service, even to the oppressors. (1975, p. 150)

Cone argues that as the chosen of God, oppressed black Americans are ethically responsible to none other than themselves while engaged in their project of liberation. Because Cone limits the ability to receive God's liberating vision to black Americans (and the rare few others who undergo conversion to the oppressed), there is no external means of verifying/ensuring that black Americans are acting on God's will. Cone writes:

Because the oppressed community is the place where one encounters God's liberating deed, it is also the only place where one can know the will of God . . . Thus the criteria of ethical judgment can only be hammered out in the community of the victims of injustice. (1975, p. 207)

While Cone acknowledges a lack of absolute principles for discerning God's will, he argues that discernment must be reached in dialogue with Scripture, tradition, and other oppressed people. Yet the greater weight is given to the judgment of the oppressed, with the biblical actions of Jesus used as signs or pointers rather than examples of God's will in the present black liberation struggle. The practical means of liberation are for Cone, to be decided by the oppressed community. Discussing this matter, he writes:

In a society where white is equated with good and black is defined as bad, humanity and divinity mean an unqualified identification with blackness. The divine election of the oppressed means that black people are given the power of judgment over the high and mighty whites. (p. 225)

***Blackness as Bad***

As the preceding excerpts from GOTO demonstrate, blackness is positioned in opposition to whiteness as goodness manifested through both Christ's embodiment of blackness and through God's election of black Americans as his "Kingdom of Priests." Importantly, blackness also is signified negatively as epitomizing the victimhood, brokenness, and helplessness of oppression.

When, for example, Cone attributes the presence of God in the lives of African Americans as determinant of their survival Cone states: "It was the divine presence in their situation that held their humanity together in the midst of the brokenness of black existence" (Cone, 1975, p. 57). The description of black existence as brokenness is significant in that it suggests that the black experience has only negative aspects (Williams, 1993). Additional evidence of the negative signification of blackness is found in Cone's designation of African American's as victims. Contrasting the cultural context of white and African American theology, Cone states: ". . . black people's religious ideas were shaped by the cultural and political existence of the victims in North America" (Cone, 1975, p. 53). Still further evidence of the negative connotation of blackness is found in Cone's discussion of the risk of faith involved in proclaiming the relevance of the biblical message for black existence. According to Cone, theologians must take the risk of faith and be ". . . prophetic by doing theology in light of those who are helpless and voiceless in the society" (Cone, 1975, p. 82).

### ***Liberation/Salvation in Black and White***

Cone devotes much of the discussion of the meaning of liberation in *God of the Oppressed* to its application for African Americans. The sparse mention of the meaning of liberation for white Americans creates an absence in the text that places these two processes of liberation in binary opposition to each other.

According to Cone (1975), liberation for black Americans is both a transcendent and an historical reality that culminates in a divine-human encounter of reconciliation. Liberation is transcendent because it provides a self-knowledge and an “expression of the image of God” (p. 145) such that the oppressed come to realize that they are divinely created for freedom and that regardless of historical outcomes, the victory of the oppressed is guaranteed by God. Liberation for black Americans also is the historical project of freedom whereby the vertical encounter with God provides “God’s gift of freedom” (p. 144) which propels the oppressed into political action against their oppression. Cone is clear that, for black Americans, there is no liberation disconnected from the struggle for freedom in this world nor is their freedom disconnected from a communal effort for that freedom. In the fore-mentioned context of liberation, Cone clearly limits the beneficiaries of liberation to the oppressed in America (i.e. black Americans).

Although reconciliation is given to African Americans unreservedly, only white Americans who freely shed their ‘white values’ may be reconciled with God. This is Cone’s concept of white conversion. In the few sections of *God of the Oppressed* that speak explicitly to the issue of white American reconciliation/salvation, Cone expresses

strong skepticism about white American conversion. In the following passage, Cone expresses the difficulty of white conversion as follows:

I am not ruling out the rare possibility of conversion among white oppressors . . . . But conversion in the biblical sense is a radical experience, and it ought not to be identified with white sympathy for blacks or with pious feeling in white folks' hearts. In the Bible, conversion is closely identified with repentance . . . (1975, p. 241)

In order for this conversion to oppression to occur, white Americans must “. . . free themselves from their culture to join the cultural freedom of the poor” (p. 148); they must, in other words, participate in the project of black American liberation. Cone clearly links white conversion to political action for the oppressed by arguing that white consciousness must be born anew in light of black liberation. In the following excerpt, he further argues the point.

Indeed, because the values of white culture are antithetical to biblical revelation, it is impossible to be white (culturally speaking) and also think biblically. Biblical thinking is liberated thought, i.e., and thinking that is not entrapped by social categories of the dominant culture. If white theologians are to understand this through process, they must undergo a conversion wherein they are given, by the Holy Spirit, a new way of thinking and acting in the world, defined and limited by God's will to liberate the oppressed. To think biblically is to think in light of the liberating interest of the oppressed. Any other starting point is a contradiction of the social a priori of the Scripture. (Cone, 1975, p. 97)

In order for white Americans to be free (receive salvation) they must be reconciled with God through a relinquishing of white values. Again, this is Cone's understanding of white conversion. Cone contrasts black American and white American reconciliation succinctly when he writes: “While divine reconciliation, for oppressed

blacks, is connected with the joy of liberation from the controlling power of white people, for whites divine reconciliation is connected with God's wrathful destruction of white values" (Cone, 1975, p. 237).

***Black Suffering as Good, Black Suffering as Bad***

Although Cone makes it clear that oppression is a negative condition which God does not desire for humanity, Cone's binary formulation necessitates that he also attribute positive qualities to the condition of oppression. Indeed, it is only the oppressed (i.e. those who suffer from economic, political, and social oppression) who are free enough (i.e. who have the appropriate social a priori) to receive God's liberating vision for the world. Cone's binary opposition between liberation and oppression creates what is for him an unavoidable paradox of freedom. Although ". . . freedom is the opposite of oppression, . . . only the oppressed are truly free" (Cone, 1975, p. 147). Only those who are oppressed can see that the true liberation of self is found in the community in struggle of freedom. In short, true liberation can only be found through struggle. Cone takes for granted that the service required of God's elect requires suffering. For Cone, the oppressed are called to suffer and be slaves for all because all must be liberated for black liberation to be fully realized. This God-sanctioned [good] suffering differs from the [bad] suffering due to unjust social structures. Cone describes the purpose and content of this suffering in the following passage. It is cited at length to accurately reflect Cone's argument.

. . . Christians are called to suffer with God in the fight against evil in the present age. This view gives us a new perspective on suffering. The oppressed are called to fight against suffering by becoming God's suffering servants in the world . . .

suffering therefore is reinterpreted in the light of Jesus' cross and resurrection and of our call to become liberated sufferers with God. There is joy in our suffering insofar as we have to suffer for freedom . . . when suffering is inflicted upon the oppressed it is evil and we must struggle against it, but when suffering arises out of the struggle against suffering, as in the fight against injustice, we accept it as a constituent of our calling and thus voluntarily suffer, because there is no freedom independent of the fight for justice. (1975, p. 177)

***Meta-narratives Implicit within God of the Oppressed***

Up to this point, the binary oppositions within GOTO have been identified. These included: blackness versus whiteness, the black social a priori versus the white social a priori, black theology versus white theology, and black salvation versus white salvation. Implicit within these binaries are meta-narratives, or ideological assumptions that endorse certain views as given. When such binaries run counter to the libratory goals of GOTO, they serve as a hindrance rather than a facilitator of liberation. Articulating such oppressive binaries is necessary if libratory efforts are to be realized. Thus, the focus of this analysis now shifts to the explication of counter-libratory binaries in GOTO.

In describing biblical thought, Cone says: "Biblical thinking is liberated thought, i.e. thinking that is not entrapped by social categories of the dominant culture" (Cone, 1975, p. 97). If Cone is to be held to his own definition, his reliance on the black/white good/bad binary is indicative of non-biblical thinking because his theology merely inverts the racist hierarchies of Western society he critiques. His reliance on this binary, therefore constrains the libratory force of his conceptualizations. The political implications of these binaries will now be discussed.

*The Black Social A Priori Versus the White Social A Priori*

Cone argues that the black social a priori permits honest interpretations of the gospel while the white social a priori only affords distorted interpretations of scripture, due to the oppressive and inherently evil nature of white culture and white values. Indeed, Cone portrays white Americans as ‘children of the devil.’ Yet this presentation is questionable given Cone’s own argument that white theology and white values have been derived from the social a priori of the Enlightenment. He writes:

The difference between Black theology and white theology does not lie in the absence of a social a priori in the former. Like white theologians, black theologians do theology out of the social matrix of their existence. The dissimilarity between Black theology and white theology lies at the point of each having different mental grids, which account for their different mental approaches to the gospel. While I believe that the social a priori of Black theology is closer to the axiological perspective of biblical revelation, for the moment the point is simply the inescapable interplay between theology and society—whether white or Black theology. (1975, p. 45)

Here Cone clearly links both black theology and white theology to socio-contextual influences. If white theology and white values are a result of the social context of white Americans, it seems unfair to condemn whites as ‘children of the devil’ because of their theological interpretations. To be children of Satan suggests an inherent evil; to be insensitive to the oppression of African Americans because those issues fall outside one’s social a priori does not. Cone acknowledges that white theology is context specific, yet he also presents whites as inherently evil. Of the American values that he suggests resulted from the social a priori of whites he states:

The principalities and powers of evil, mythically expressed in the figure of Satan, represent not only metaphysical realities but earthly realities as well. They are the American system, symbolized in Gerald Ford and other government officials, who oppress the poor, humiliate the weak, and make heroes out of rich capitalists. (Cone, 1975, p. 232)

It seems that Cone wants to have it both ways. He is forced to acknowledge the influence of the social a priori in white theology because he argues that the social a priori of oppression allowed black theology to maintain faithful biblical interpretation. Yet he also wants to discount the social a priori of white Americans by presenting them as inherently evil. Certainly, such a presentation is understandable. In response to the silence of white America regarding the persistence of black suffering in America (and this silence certainly was tantamount to collusion in black suffering) it is understandable that Cone would portray whiteness as evil. Yet this portrayal locks Cone into a logical argument that is not compatible with his liberatory aims.

Faced with the prospect of evil, one has few options of resistance except prayer (Purpel & McLaurin, Jr., 2004). If white American oppression of black Americans resulted from the inherent evilness of whites, black Americans are left with few options for alleviating this oppression, except praying. What is the use of fighting given such a scenario? Cone (1975) argues that the vertical encounter with God propels black Americans to fight for their God-given freedom, yet one is led to wonder about the political usefulness of such struggle if there are no realistic expectations of human victory against the inherent evil of whiteness.



### *Salvation and Reconciliation in Black and White*

For Cone, white Americans cannot escape God's destruction of white values, as this is the meaning of God's liberating actions in the U. S. Through a process of conversion, they can, however, repent of their sins of oppression and be reborn to struggle against oppression. Although Cone is not specific about the exact process through which white conversion occurs, he is clear that this decidedly rare occurrence necessitates that the white American ". . . die to whiteness and [become] reborn anew in order to struggle against white oppression and for liberation of the oppressed . . ." (Cone, 1975, p. 242).

That whites will not likely be saved in Cone's mind is evidence of what bell hooks (2003) terms oppositional thinking. In a system of domination, such thinking reflects the belief that one group's gain must necessarily be associated with another group's loss. Relevant to Cone's theology this suggests that the end of oppression for African Americans must necessarily mean the beginning of oppression (e.g. eternal damnation) for white Americans. There is no possibility for both African Americans and white Americans to be reconciled with each other and with God, thereby transcending the cycle of domination and subjugation entirely.

In essence, Cone's formulation locks blacks and whites into static positions of victim and oppressor, with no possibility for transcending these identities. In the following quote, bell hooks speaks to the problems of designating African Americans as victims and whites as inherently evil:

By investing in the notion that they can only be “victims” in relation to those who have power over them, who may more often than not deploy that power in a way that reinforces oppressive hierarchy, they lose sight not only of their strength to resist but of the possibility that they can intervene and change the perspective of those in power. (2003a, p. 73)

Such a scenario is suggestive of the theory of power formulated by Michel Foucault—in relationships of power, those dominated and subjugated can switch places (i.e. whites can be portrayed as children of the devil and Jesus Christ can be proclaimed the black messiah), but never completely escape the mechanisms of power. Thus Cone’s formula is left without realistic means of reconciliation between oppressor and oppressed; evil cannot be reconciled by human activity, but only through God’s eschatological activity.

### ***God the Father***

In GOTO, salvation (i.e. reconciliation), if it is to be received, must come from God. Thus, implicit in GOTO is a sense of defeatism; Cone enlists a patriarchal metaphor of God the Father as the only solution to black oppression. His reliance on God, to the virtual exclusion of humanity to end black suffering is significant. Such a scenario is especially problematic in terms of liberation efforts because it discourages agency and responsibility on the part of humans and promotes instead a patriarchal ideology in which God the father must save his children.

Sallie McFague (1982) highlights the problematics of the religious metaphor of ‘God the Father.’ Such a metaphor implies that humans are infantile children who can only be saved from our destructive tendencies by God, our patriarchal leader. The metaphor of God the Father plays prominently in Cone’s theology. African Americans

are presented as the helpless children whose Father (e.g. God) must protect them from harm (i.e. white oppression). McFague rightly argues that such a conceptualization is irresponsible because it allows humans to evade responsibility for social justice. She writes:

Moreover, it appears increasingly to be the case that our health and well-being, which is to say, our “salvation,” depends in part on ourselves, on our willingness and ability to work cooperatively and with all our intelligence and strength. Any notion of salvation which presumes that individuals can be rescued from the world; that does not take seriously our necessary efforts to participate in the struggle against oppression and for well-being; or that allows us to abjure our responsibility by appealing as children to a father who will alone protect and save—any such notion must be seen as immoral, irrelevant, and destructive. (McFague, 1982, p. 186)

In addition to discouraging human agency for social transformation, Cone’s depiction of the black/white binary is fundamentally erroneous. Essentialized notions of good and evil, victim and oppressor suggest that all whites are evil oppressors and all blacks are good and oppressed (Anderson, 1995).

When the politics of domination are understood as interlocking spheres in which everyone enjoys some degree of privilege and is inflicted by some degree of oppression (Collins, 1990, 2000; hooks, 1984), Cone’s essentialized presentations appear implausible. Oppositional thinking perpetuates domination because it allows individuals to remain uncritical and therefore complicit in systems of domination (hooks, 2003). Cone’s depiction of whites as the evil enemy essentializes both whites and blacks by limiting the possible ways these identities can be understood.

Such a view blocks from Cone's conceptual grid the patriarchal oppression of women (regardless of race/ethnicity) by men and particularly, the oppression of African American women by African American men (Williams, 1993). His failure to recognize the patriarchal oppression of African American women is just one example of the manner in which his discourse is implicated in a patriarchal meta-narrative that discounts his assertions of theological purity. If, as Cone contends, Christ stands in opposition to white Americans because their culture oppresses African Americans, would not Christ also stand in opposition to African American males because their culture oppresses African American women? Taking this line of thought further, would not Christ the Liberator stand with African American women and white women against African American men and white men because the patriarchal ideology of the latter have historically been implemented against the former? While such complications of social position reflect the reality of the human experience, they are treated as 'irrelevant data' in GOTO because they don't fit Cone's binary model.

***God Sides with Blacks, God is against Whites***

Arguably an even more compelling example of Cone's reliance on counter-libratory binaries is to be found in his declaration that God is on the side of black Americans against white Americans. Tellingly, Cone (1975) writes:

Reconciliation between blacks and whites means that God is unquestionably on the side of the oppressed blacks struggling for justice. His justification is his righteous and total identification with black existence, taking it upon himself and revealing that he will not tolerate the wrong committed against his people. (p. 235)

Only from the perspective of oppositional thinking is it necessary for God to be on the side of either oppressors or the oppressed. Acknowledgement of the interlocking spheres of domination begs the question of just who God supposedly sides with. If all are oppressed in some way, would not God be continuously switching allegiances, depending on the context of oppression?

Of course, Cone addresses the idea that all are oppressed in GOTO, yet he concludes that although there is truth in this statement, the truth of it can only be understood from the perspective of those who are oppressed by unjust social structures. He writes: “For it is material reality (i.e. social, economic, and political existence with the poor) that makes for the proper understanding of spiritual reality (‘all are oppressed’) . . .” (Cone, 1975, p. 149).

For Cone, the danger of conceding the spiritual reality that all are oppressed runs the risk of glossing over real material differences in the lived experiences of poor and non poor people. Thus conceding the fact that all are in some way oppressed and privileged could decrease the force of his argument against the inhumane oppression of black Americans. Black American oppression in this context, could be construed as no better or worse than other oppressions. Stated differently, Cone privileges the suffering and oppression of black Americans because conceding the significance of other suffering runs the risk of making all suffering a matter of relative perception.

While the dangerous political implications of such a concession of relativity are clear, Cone’s own formulation suggests an ideological argument (i.e. the relationship between black election and suffering) that is arguably more politically dangerous than

acknowledgement of the interlocking dimensions of oppression. Oppression is bad, but suffering is good (the problem with black election as service to God).

As previously stated, much of GOTO is based on oppositional thinking that presents essentialized notions of blackness and whiteness. Blacks are victims of whites' oppression; blackness represents virtually unqualified goodness while whiteness represents almost absolute evil. Yet in order for Cone to maintain his dual arguments of white oppression/black victimhood and black goodness/white evil, he is forced to engage in mental gymnastics whereby blackness is conflated with both positive and negative connotations and the suffering endured by blacks also is portrayed as positive and negative.

Cone's designation of whites as evil necessitates that he also portray blacks as victims. Indeed, much of his discourse highlights the brokenness, helplessness, and victimhood of black Americans under oppression. Cone's usage of blackness as a dual signifier for both goodness and negativity is significant in that it highlights contradictions within his theology. The signification of blackness as 'brokenness' and despair must be maintained to emphasize what is in Cone's view the utter evil of whiteness. Were the black experience not codified by Cone as 'brokenness,' then the treatment of blacks by white Americans would arguably not seem as detestable.

Yet this presentation is problematic for liberatory efforts. Those who are completely helpless are at the mercy of their oppressors because they have no power or resources to mobilize resistance. Cone's continued depiction of blacks as helpless victims suggests a lack of power on the part of blacks in Cone's view. Yet in the following

passage Cone explicitly expresses the need for power in the struggle for liberation.

Arguing that black people must have resources mobilized in order to effectively battle white Americans for liberation, he states that black Americans must “. . . be ready to do battle with the powers of evil. For the oppressors will not grant freedom merely through shouting. The oppressed must have the power to take it” (Cone, 1975, p. 212).

Cone’s previous designations of blacks as broken and helpless beg the question of where these victims will amass the power needed to take their liberation. Indeed, it has been previously argued in this analysis that given Cone’s formulation, black liberation cannot be realized through human achievement. Cone employs a metaphor of God the Father to fix black oppression. The political implications of this metaphor also have been discussed in preceding sections of this analysis.

Also problematic in Cone’s argument for blackness as a dual signifier of goodness and negativity is his appropriation of black Americans as God’s elect. Cone appropriates the theme of election from biblical references to Israel’s election by God, yet his appropriation is uncritical. Several womanist scholars<sup>24</sup> have observed the problematics associated with appropriating the theme of election uncritically. While Israel enjoyed election in the Bible, Israelites participated in the destruction of an entire nation of people—the Canaanites (Williams, 1993). An uncritical appropriation of Israel’s election to black American liberation suggests an implicit endorsement of the Canaanite genocide and consequently raises ethical concerns regarding the appropriateness of such identification.

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<sup>24</sup> See for example Weems (1993) and Williams (1993).

Cone's presentation also raises questions about the accountability of black Americans as they engage in their political struggle. As has been previously argued in this analysis, Cone's portrayal of blackness as unqualified goodness influences his assertions that black Americans alone, must determine the moral and ethical limits of their struggle (Cone, 1975). Thus, as in the historical case of Israel's biblical election, those deemed elect by God are in danger of becoming the very oppressors that God seeks to destroy. Again, if whiteness is evil then black Americans must struggle without them in the fight against oppression while they await God's eschatological cessation of oppression.

That Cone suggests as unqualified identification with blackness implies that oppressed blacks can do little wrong in their liberation struggle. Yet given Cone's own admittance that varying degrees of clarity exist regarding God's will among the oppressed (i.e. some of the oppressed have internalized values of their oppressors) and the fact that Cone's vision of liberation takes for granted the inevitability of violence in the liberation struggle, it seems doubtful that liberation efforts not intended to ". . . make the oppressors the slaves but to transform humanity" (Cone, 1975, p. 217) could be successful when grounded in an uncritical view of black election.

Cone (1975) readily asserts that ultimate liberation will only be achieved by black Americans through God's eschatological activity. Yet, while black Americans cannot achieve liberation on their own, neither apparently can God. In an amazing display of mental gymnastics, Cone superimposes onto the metaphor of God the Father another metaphor of blacks as God's suffering servants. Cone argues that God's elect are called



into service for human liberation. Cone takes for granted that this service will involve suffering. Discussing this idea he writes:

Suffering therefore is reinterpreted in the light of Jesus' cross and resurrection and of our call to become liberated sufferers with God. There is joy in our suffering insofar as we have to suffer for freedom...Therefore when suffering is inflicted upon the oppressed, it is evil and we must struggle against it. But when suffering arises out of the struggle against suffering, as in the fight against injustice, we accept it as a constituent of our calling and thus voluntarily suffer . . . (Cone, 1975, p. 177)

Thus, "Black people, therefore, as God's suffering servant, are called to suffer with God in the liberation of humanity" (Cone, 1975, p. 193). Consequently, the onus of responsibility for fighting for freedom rests solely with the oppressed and those who freely convert to the oppressed. Cone writes:

. . . the oppressed recognize that their call is to be God's kingdom of priests to all peoples of the Earth. Election involves service, even to the oppressors . . . the struggle for liberation is the service the people of God render for all, even those who are responsible for the structure of slavery. (p. 151)

The mental gymnastics employed to maintain this argument is dizzying. If the suffering of God's elect is divinely mandated, it becomes difficult to understand why Cone argues so much against black suffering. He argues that suffering arising from unjust social structures is evil, yet suffering in the benefit of liberation is joyful and should therefore be reinterpreted as good. Therefore, if one simply accepts one's suffering, it is bad, but if one embraces the suffering as requisite for human liberation, it is good. The difference between good and bad suffering then, can be understood simply as a state of mind.

What is disturbing about this argument is that it adheres closely to the logic of Cartesian duality—the argument for a mind body split utilized to keep African slaves oppressed. As the argument went, enslaved Africans could convert to Christianity and receive otherworldly salvation while remaining the physical chattel of their slave owners (Pinn, 2002). In essence, this mind body split permitted the Christianization of the American slave system. Yet Cone relies on this same mind body split to justify his argument that suffering black Americans are divinely mandated to endure more suffering for the liberation of humanity. The very real physical aspects of black suffering (physical abuse, hunger, unemployment, incarceration, infant mortality, inadequate healthcare, etc.) are trivialized. Suffering in this sense, becomes spiritualized, treated as an abstract rather than a physical reality. Cone argues that there is joy in black suffering (once the correct frame of mind is obtained) because it carries the promise of ultimate liberation. This is Cone's mind/body split that privileges the idea of suffering for liberation over the real physical consequences of black suffering.

Cone takes it for granted that black Americans must suffer for the liberation of all humanity. But why is this so? Implicit here is a meta-narrative of exceptionalism (West, 1982). The idea that black Americans are special (i.e. elect) and therefore somehow more suited for service and suffering than other human beings (West, 1982). Certainly, this line of exceptionalist thinking is not new in black theological discourse. This discourse was apparent in Martin Luther King's moral suasion tactics and his argument that suffering was redemptive (West, 1982). Yet exceptionalist discourse is politically disastrous for oppressed black Americans. There is something very insidious and dangerous in

promoting the act of suffering to people who are already vulnerable to suffering and abuse (Williams, 1993). That Cone promotes suffering as joyous is politically irresponsible because it depicts suffering positively—as a condition to be aspired to because it indicates pleasure in God's sight (i.e. chosen-ness).

### ***Concluding Thoughts on GOTO***

Cone's insistence on maintaining the black/white binary marginalizes black women, poor whites, and other groups failing to fit into his essentialized projections of blackness and whiteness. This formulation creates circumstances that are ripe for black Americans (as God's elect) to change positions with white Americans as oppressors, but it does not allow enough space and creativity for transcendence.

Most troubling, however, is the fact that Cone's analysis calls upon the oppressed to not only survive their oppression (certainly this should be considered an accomplishment in and of itself) but to bear the responsibility for liberating themselves and their oppressors. In truth, those who are intent on keeping black Americans oppressed would be hard-pressed to devise a better means of perpetuating black oppression than Cone's formulation. By relieving unconverted oppressors of their responsibility to change and placing the onus of liberation on the already overburdened, abused, and socially, politically, and economically exploited/excluded, Cone all but guarantees that his vision of a transformed humanity will never come to pass. Blacks are elected to inaugurate a new vision for humanity but they must do it alone because white oppressors (unless they are

born anew to oppression) can't be trusted. Excluded from the loop of liberation, whites continue perpetuating the status quo, while oppressed blacks, as God's suffering servants are required to struggle in isolation against the status quo.

There is a great deal of political danger in Cone's discourse because it mortgages black liberation at the expense of black humanity. The cost of Cone's black liberation is too high; given Cone's own acknowledgement that GOTO is (as is all theology) a faith claim that bears no historical proof of God's liberating activity for the oppressed. He writes:

In the final analysis we must admit that there is no way to 'prove objectively' that we are telling the truth about ourselves or about the One who has called us into being. There is no place we can stand that will remove us from the limitations of history and thus enable us to tell the whole truth without the risk of ideological distortion. As long as we live and have our being in time and space, absolute truth is impossible. But this concession is not an affirmation of unrestricted relativity. We can and must say something about the world that is not reducible to our subjectivity. (Cone, 1975, p. 102)

Absolute truth is impossible; what is possible (indeed highly likely) is that the joyful suffering Cone advocates could be in vain. As Cone rightly points out, such is the stuff of faith claims. Still, a more liberating faith claim would not glamorize suffering for those who are already exploited economically, socially, emotionally, etc. Clearly, a more liberating vision is needed.

GOTO is exceptional in its ability to firmly grasp and explicate the false connections between racism and (white) theology. Cone's insights correctly challenged the dominance and presumed universality of white theology. He also correctly argued that the issue of black liberation was appropriate and relevant not only for black theology,

but for all theological reflection. Yet Cone's analysis of structures of domination also is complicit in perpetuating counter libratory meta-narratives.

Admittedly, this analysis of Cone's work benefits from hindsight because it takes advantage of and summarizes responses to GOTO by voices not represented in his 1975 book. His theology in GOTO was in large part an apologetic—a response to the subtle and overt forms of racism that he experienced as a black male in the United States. The starting point of his analysis determined in large measure the content of his theological discourse. As Cone himself recognized, such is the mechanism of the social a priori. It constrains the ability to conceive of contexts as being otherwise.

Trapped within a racist social system, Cone's vision in GOTO<sup>25</sup> was largely limited to an inversion of the white/black hierarchy that oppressed him. Cone's inability to see outside the constraints of his oppression does not, however, preclude the possibility of more inclusive and libratory articulations. As Cone (1975) argues, "we can and must say something about the world that is not reducible to our subjectivity" (p. 102). Given the ideological problematics identified within GOTO, it is imperative that the search for more inclusive and politically beneficial God-talk continue.

**M. Shawn Copeland: "Wading through Many Sorrows: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective" (1993)**

Though understandably limited in applicability to diverse segments of the black religious community, Cone's black theology of liberation nevertheless resonated with

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<sup>25</sup> Recognition is given here to the fact that Cone's theology has evolved to reflect a greater awareness of the limitations discussed in this chapter. For an example of Cone's theological evolution see *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (1991) by James Cone.

many black theologians. His continued influence manifests itself in the work of second generation black theologians, and womanist black theologians. M. Shawn Copeland is one such theologian who has maintained ties to Cone's theological reflection in GOTO. A deconstruction of her 1993 work: "Wading through Many Sorrows: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective" follows.

Womanist theology developed in the early 1970's (Pinn, 2002); its current conceptualizations are broadly based on delineations of the term womanist, coined by the author Alice Walker in her work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1984). Womanist theology is prophetic in that it engages in theological reflection on the nature of suffering and on the multiple forms of oppressive structures/circumstances that constrain black women in order to liberate all humanity (Townes, 1993). Womanist theology also highlights black women's active strategies of resistance to oppression.

In this sense, M. Shawn Copeland's (1993) "Wading through Many Sorrows: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective" is representative. Copeland's essay focuses on the disproportionate amount of suffering endured by black women in America in an attempt to reinterpret its purpose and function. Understanding suffering to be universal and inescapable, Copeland's essay chronicles black women's experiences of suffering (especially during slavery) and identifies resources supportive of black women's resistance to oppression. In doing so, she argues for a 'theology of suffering' (p. 111) that is sensitive to both the multidimensional sources of suffering for black women and their active strategies to endure and transform these sources.

For Copeland, suffering is understood to be “. . . the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence” (p. 109) which can result in positive goods even though it is connected to evil. In the following excerpt, Copeland explains the relationship between evil, suffering, and positive good. She writes:

Evil is the negation and deprivation of good; suffering, while never identical with evil, is inseparable from it. Thus, and quite paradoxically, the suffering caused by evil can result in interior development and perfection as well as in social and cultural good. (Copeland, 1993, p. 109)

Guided by the above understanding of suffering, Copeland’s essay conceptually explores the good that can result from black women’s experience and resistance to oppression.

Methodologically, Copeland explores Harriet Jacobs’ slave narrative, chronicling the extensive sexual and racial oppression that Jacobs was forced to endure. Copeland supplants this narrative with slave narratives from other women that also are indicative of the particularized oppressive forces thrust upon black women. Despite the harrowing accounts of abuse and oppression in these accounts, Copeland argues that the spirits of those black women she discusses were not destroyed. Although they were:

. . . caught in the vicious nexus spawned in chattel slavery—full of arrogant self-assertion of white male power and privilege; white female ambivalence and hatred, the suffering of black women and men . . . the women may be caught but they are not trapped. These black women wade through their sorrows, managing their suffering, rather than being managed by it. (Copeland, 1993, p. 118)

For Copeland, black women’s ability to wade through their sorrows was a result of their resistance resources, specifically their Christianity. However, Copeland argues that this

resource was utilized selectively by black women. According to Copeland, black slave women appropriated the biblical revelation they received, especially the Exodus event and the crucifixion, into an understanding of God as the ‘author of freedom’ (p. 120) who encouraged them to resist their oppression.

Copeland cites memory as another resource for black women’s resistance because it allowed slaves to recover and reconstruct those aspects of themselves that countered the negative identities and definitions of self and culture forced upon them by chattel slavery. The final resource Copeland identifies for black women’s resistance is language and particularly the sharp back-talk referred to as sass. Sass was an important resource for black women because it allowed them to “. . . guard, regain, and secure self-esteem; to obtain and hold psychological distance; to speak truth; to challenge . . .” (Copeland, 1993, p. 121) oppressive structures.

Because womanist theology understands the experiences of black women to be an appropriate point of departure for theological reflection, all understanding of oppression and strategies for resistance must be understood in light of black women’s experiences. This, for Copeland, is especially true in terms of black women’s usage of the Bible. Because the Bible’s intended use under the slave system in colonial America was to promote a religious ideology to keep slaves oppressed, black women who appropriated liberating messages from the Bible and from Christian religion were required to develop ‘distinctive Christian responses to suffering’ (p. 123) based on hermeneutics of suspicion and resistance. These interpretive frameworks allowed black Christian women to reflect on their oppression, resist it, and transform it (Copeland, 1993). Copeland argues that



engagement in these critically interpretive frameworks required a great deal of work for black women. Explaining the process through which Christian black women obtained a liberating and empowering biblical messages from a religion tainted by a historical foundation of oppression to black Americans, Copeland writes:

In its teaching, theologizing, preaching, and practice, this Christianity sought to bind the slaves in their condition by inculcating caricatures of the cardinal virtues of patience, long-suffering, forbearance, love, faith, and hope. Thus to distance itself from any form of masochism, even Christian masochism, a theology of suffering in womanist perspective must reevaluate those virtues in light of black women's experiences. Such reevaluation engages a hermeneutic of suspicion and a hermeneutic of resistance; but that reevaluation and reinterpretation must be rooted in a critical realism that rejects both naïve realism and idealism as adequate foundations for a theology of suffering. (1993, p. 122)

In addition to this selective use of Christianity, Copeland's theology of suffering also employs resistance strategies of memory and language. Memory is needed to recount the stories, wisdom, and cultural heritage of those who came before; language is needed to retell stories of the past and rearticulate oppressive elements of the present into more liberating ones (Copeland, 1993).

Copeland argues that black women utilize these resources of resistance to make their suffering redemptive. By making their suffering meaningful (i.e., interpreting their suffering as the price of freedom) Copeland argues that black women redeemed the true biblical message and gave new meaning to touted yet unrealized Christian virtues. Speaking directly to the black woman's power to transform oppressive elements of Christianity, Copeland writes:

. . . black women invite God to partner them in the redemption of black people . . . And by their very suffering and privation, black women under chattel slavery freed the cross of Christ. Their steadfast commitment honored that cross and the One who died for all and redeemed it from Christianity's vulgar misuse . . . Moreover, in their resistance, black women's suffering redeemed caricatured Christian virtues. Because of the lives of suffering of black women held in chattel slavery—the meanings of forbearance, long-suffering, patience, love, hope, and faith can never again be idealized. Because of the rape, seduction, and concubinage of black women under chattel slavery, chastity or virginity begs new meaning. (1993, p. 124)

Copeland's essay is laudable in its acknowledgement of the potentially oppressive force of the Bible for black American women and for its careful attention to the forms of subjugated knowledge utilized by black women in oppressive circumstances to make sense of their reality. Her essay extends the concept of blackness beyond James Cone's essentialized notions articulated in *God of the Oppressed*. By highlighting the complex web of oppression and resistance experienced by black women, Copeland complicates understandings of what it means to be black and oppressed. In doing so, Copeland demonstrates that rather than being monolithic, the black community has diverse needs and that the particularized suffering and strengths of black women also are appropriate points of departure for theological reflection.

Though empowering for these reasons, Copeland's account of black women's suffering and their responses to it can be clearly traced back to James Cone's notions of election, redemptive suffering, and exceptionalism as explicated in *God of the Oppressed*. Copeland's application of these concepts for black women will now be discussed.

### ***Election***

It is understandable that given the enormity of black women's suffering, Copeland desires to articulate a response to this suffering that does not suggest it is undertaken by black women in vain. Indeed, an initial reading of her text suggests empowering themes for black women. Specifically, Copeland embraces a metaphor of God the partner that appears to move beyond the metaphor of God the Father espoused in *God of the Oppressed*. Although Copeland does not explicitly express a belief in black women as God's elect, such a belief is nevertheless espoused in her discourse.

Copeland (1993) argues that black women seek partnership with God in the redemption of black lives. In doing so, she implicitly espouses a model of black women's election. Hers is not an image of God as the patriarchal hero who rescues black women from the world. Instead, black women appear, in Copeland's model, empowered; they are eager to do the work of redemption/salvation and initiate this process by inviting God to assist them in the project of liberation (Copeland, 1993). While the metaphor of God the Partner indeed appears to hold more liberatory promise than that of God the Father, when analyzed more closely it espouses themes of election and redemptive suffering.

The magnitude of work Copeland designates black women as being responsible for in her article is astounding. Black women are assigned the unenviable task of saving black Americans and rescuing Christianity from its tainted legacy (Copeland, 1993). Essentially, they are elected to liberate humanity. This election is implicit in Copeland's model. Black women are not presented as partnering with black men to redeem black people, nor are they depicted as partnering with other Christians to redeem Christianity.

In contrast, it is the unique suffering experienced by black women (as a result of oppression from black men, white men, and white women) that black women are provided the appropriate interpretive framework for carrying out the project of redemption. Because they were “. . . caught in the vicious nexus spawned in chattel slavery—full and arrogant self-assertion of white male power and white female ambivalence and hatred, the subjugation of Black women and men . . .” (Copeland, 1993, p. 118). Copeland argues that black women developed resources of resistance and transcendence that hold the promise for black redemption and for Christian redemption as well. Thus, black women represent a group of elect people charged with human redemption.

### ***Redemptive Suffering***

Copeland articulates a discourse in which black women (in partnership with God) are called to the service of redemption, but their tools of use for this project are not their resources of resistance. Instead they are elected to redeem the world through their suffering. As such, the oppressive nature of black women’s ‘partnership’ with God becomes transparent. Black women in this model seem to do all the work required of redemption. They endure ‘pain, privation, and injury’ (Copeland, 1993, p. 124), risk life and limb, and are reduced to concubinage, and endure rape—all in the service of others (Copeland, 1993). It is important to keep in mind here that while black women are engaged in the project of others’ redemption, they themselves are in need of saving. Obviously, black women need to be relieved of their suffering, their pain, and their

deprivation, but in the model presented, their needs are sacrificed for the good of humanity.

While black women are suffering, Copeland argues that God provides them with divine grace which enables them to turn “. . . victimization into Christian triumph” (Copeland, 1993, p. 119). Here Christian triumph is to be understood as an altered frame of mind producing knowledge that “. . . triumph over the principalities and powers of death, triumph over evil in this world” (Copeland, 1993, p. 120) had been realized through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, in Copeland’s model, it seems that God’s grace provides black women an altered reality within which to perform their service. Such an altered reality is not unlike that espoused by Cone in *God of the Oppressed* when he argued that black suffering in the name of liberation was joyful. Cone’s argument forced him to employ a Cartesian duality in *God of the Oppressed* that downplayed the physical suffering of black Americans. In “Wading through Many Sorrows,” Copeland is forced to employ a similar application of the mind/body split.

### ***Exceptionalism***

Although Copeland is careful to note that a theology of suffering based on the womanist perspective cannot endorse “. . . idealism distanced from critical knowledge of experience . . . of black’s reality” (Copeland, 1993, p. 123) one is left to wonder why an idealized image of black women’s suffering is so prominent in Copeland’s model. Her text suggests that black women are uniquely suited with the moral character and interpretive framework for needed to liberate the world. Though Copeland is careful to chronicle the verbal, physical, and sexual assaults endured by black women under

circumstances of oppression, she detracts from the perceived severity of black women's suffering by attributing to it redemptive significance. Copeland argues that many positive goods came out of black women's suffering including the redemption of black humanity, the redemption of the meaning of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, and the re-inscription of Cardinal virtues of forbearance, long-suffering, etc. (Copeland, 1993).

Implicitly, Copeland's discourse suggests the following question: If there is such great benefit attached to the suffering of black women, would it not be in the best interest of everyone (except, of course, black women) for their suffering to continue? After all, black women in Copeland's model are compensated for their suffering through moral victory over their oppressive circumstances.

Such are the components of an idealized understanding of suffering. Copeland privileges the moral victory of black women over their physical suffering. They become Christ figures, sacrificing themselves for the redemption of all. It may even be argued that, in Copeland's model, black women serve as surrogates for Christ because they are somehow able to—through their suffering—imbue the meaning of the Christ event with more realness, more *soul* than it would have otherwise had. Here Copeland, like Cone before her, clearly embraces a meta-narrative of exceptionalism; Black women, as presented by Copeland, are specially suited to bear the responsibility for redeeming and transforming the world.

### ***Concluding Thoughts on “Wading Through Many Sorrows”***

The exceptional characteristics and capabilities of black women are certainly noteworthy, yet Copeland's laudatory presentation of black women's successful

resources of resistance make it easy to lose sight of the very real physical suffering black women endure. Copeland's stated purpose of this article was to think about black women's suffering in novel ways—to realize some meaning which precluded their suffering from being in vain. Unfortunately, her model inscribes the suffering of black women with so much meaning that it becomes legitimated. Black women suffer for the world and in so far as their suffering helps everyone, it is justified. If consideration were not given to the physical realities of suffering, one could easily argue that the sacrifice of black women is a small price to pay for the redemption of humanity. Yet it must be remembered that black women's moral victory (i.e. Christian triumph) is essentially meaningless if it does nothing to end their very real physical suffering.

Moral victory cannot prevent the horror of rape, stop physical assault, ease hunger pangs, provide adequate housing, or keep one's children safe. Moral victory derived from physical suffering cannot release one from physical suffering. For black women living in situations of oppression, the benefits of moral victory are, therefore, dubious. Thus for all the emancipatory promise Copeland's metaphor of God the Partner invoked, the end result is a persistent meta-narrative suggestive of black people's (and in this instance black women's) ontological status as servants and sufferers for the world. Black women suffer and receive moral victory through God's grace. It is indeed ironic that black women, in partnership with God, can in many ways redeem the Redeemer, while their own redemption is realized in mind only. Rather than imaging God and black women as co-partners, such a scenario at best images black women as 'suffering servants' and God as 'silent partner.'

Still more needs to be said about the redemptive nature of suffering Copeland projects. While the focus of this analysis has been on the historical ‘benefits’ of black women’s suffering, Copeland also discusses present-day benefits that continue to be derived from black suffering. She rationalizes that the suffering of black Americans has produced wonderful music, art, and religious expressions. That these expressions originated from black suffering is not in question. What is contested here is whose benefits these ‘fruits’ of suffering serve (Spelman, 1997). These fruits of black suffering—particularly black expressions of music and art have traditionally been commodified, usurped by those outside the black community for profit (Cashmore, 1997). As enjoyment for others, these fruits service a parasitic type of enjoyment derived from black suffering.

Moreover, it is not overstating the obvious to say that without experiences of African enslavement, Jim Crowism, de facto segregation, and contemporary apartheid in the U. S., blacks would not have *needed* to produce these mediums. Black theological reflection originated in enslaved Africans’ attempts to make sense of their enslavement (West, 1982). It is not difficult to imagine that most black Americans, given the choice of suffering and retaining these cultural treasures or not suffering and not having them, would choose the latter. That suffering enabled black Americans to produce soulful theology, beautiful art, and innovative music does not redeem suffering. These expressions simply represent forms of adaptation to suffering that facilitate survival. Similarly, black women’s resistance strategies in the context of suffering enables them to survive suffering—these strategies to not redeem suffering. Suffering does not ennoble



(Townes, 1993); any attempts to imbue suffering with redemptive qualities run the very real danger of discouraging those who suffer from resisting their circumstances. Such arguments act as a detriments to rather than facilitators of liberation.

One needs look no further than one of the subjects of Copeland's analysis, Harriet Jacobs, for evidence of the detrimental effects of certain resistance efforts black women employ. Copeland argues that black women's resources sustained them as they suffered to liberate humanity. Yet her concluding paragraph attests to the psychological trauma Jacob's endured while struggling to resolve conflict between the sexual choices she made and the biblical teachings she aspired to follow. While Copeland argues that black women's selective reading of the Bible allowed for liberating visions in oppressive circumstances, Jacobs' emotional trauma refutes such claims. Copeland admits that:

Harriet Jacobs' sexual liaison with Mr. Sands caused her great remorse and she experiences a loss of self-esteem. Indeed, for Jacobs, this spiritual and existential agony shadows the remainder of her life. A theology of suffering in womanist perspective ought to offer her comfort . . . (1993, p. 124)

That Jacobs was not comforted by her resistance efforts is noteworthy. Jacobs' angst begs the question of how useful such a theology, based on the experiences of women who themselves were not liberated by their resistance practices, can help contemporary black women in their struggles. In essence, Copeland's theology is an attempt to idealize the liberating effects of the suffering these black women endured. As previously stated, idealized suffering is suffering nonetheless, and it is to be avoided, not embraced (Townes, 1993; Williams, 1993).

If the purpose of black theology (and womanist theology) is to provide liberating messages to blacks about their purpose in life and ultimate meaning, a theology of suffering must be found lacking. Jacob's questioning and conflict underscore the fact that a theology of suffering does little to alter physical consequences of suffering (i.e. physical abuse, starvation, economic exploitation) and does even less to assuage the historical consequences of sacrificing black women's bodies for some abstract greater theological good.

Any theological discourse that attempts to uncover moral value in the suffering of black bodies runs the danger of further exploiting oppressed blacks. The risk is too great because the suffering of blacks in America has gone on for too long; such interpretations must therefore be abandoned in favor of more liberating visions of African American purpose and meaning.

The brilliance of James Cone's theological reflection in *God of the Oppressed* arguably lay in its ability to strike a resounding chord with diverse segments of the black community despite its fore-mentioned limitations of theological vision. Cone articulated a liberating hermeneutic that connected what he identified as the "true" message of the gospel—decisive action on behalf of the poor and the oppressed. Among those for whom this hermeneutic resonated loudly was philosopher and scholar of African American studies, Cornel West. In the following article, West enhances Cone's work on black theology by extending it to what is, for West, its logical progression—a critique of capitalist civilization.

**Cornel West: “Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of Capitalist Civilization”**

**(1993a)**

Cornel West’s (1993a) article “Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of Capitalist Civilization” is an important work because it provides a concise analysis of the historical development of black theology and also provides insights on the future direction of black theological reflection. In this article, West identifies what he believes to be the limitations and the positive aspects of black theology as previously articulated. Additionally, he argues that a re-articulation of black theology, supportive of both the prophetic Christian tradition and the progressive Marxist tradition, is needed for black theology to adequately address the present-day oppressive structures impacting black American life (West, 1993a).

West relies heavily on the Marxist understanding of human fallibility, which he terms the ‘tragic aspects of being human’ (p. 422) to frame his understanding of black theological development. He argues that although progress can be made, no human endeavor can ever be perfected due to the constraints of human limitation. Speaking to this aspect of human fallibility West (1993a) writes:

I believe that any social vision, political praxis or existential concern must take seriously the tragic aspects of our fallen, finite conditions and circumstances. To take seriously the tragic aspects of being human means to acknowledge the inevitable gap between human aims and human accomplishments, between human aspirations and human achievements. (p. 421)

Thus for West, stages of black theological reflection are evidenced by leaps and limits in human understanding. Leaps in black theology are demonstrated through increases in

black American understandings of and critiques against the sources of oppression that most immediately threaten black life (West, 1993a). Limits in human understanding are demonstrated through instances of blindness to certain interconnecting dimensions of oppression and their existential consequences (West, 1993a).

West identifies four criteria indicative of Marxist critique and uses these criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of each stage of black theological development. These criteria include: (a) appreciation of the moral significance of the plight of exploited and oppressed individuals; (b) utilization of high level social theory to identify and demystify sources of exploitation and oppression; (c) the real ability to alter the status quo; and (d) either a “. . . faith praxis or a political movement with organization, power, and social vision, with leaders of impeccable integrity” (West, 1993a, p. 417).

West then chronicles five stages in the development of prophetic black theology; he describes the first (1650-1863) as a critique of the institution of slavery. This critique was grounded, according to West, in the black slave experience and began “. . . when African slaves first tried to make sense of their servitude in light of biblical texts” (West, 1993a, p. 410). West identifies the second stage (1864-1969) in the development of black theological reflection as a critique of institutional racism and identifies Martin Luther King, Jr. and the black power movement both as its constituent elements. West’s third stage (1969-1977) of black theological reflection is a critique of white North American theology. A key element of this stage was the emergence of systematically codified articulations of black theology such as James Cone’s (1975) *God of the Oppressed*. As awareness grew of the connections between white racism and U. S. capitalism, West

argues that the fourth stage (1978-present) of black theological development evolved. In this stage black theologians identified U. S. monopoly capitalism as an exploitative system that organized life in ways that were detrimental to humanity and especially to black humanity. Here a closer look at West's explication of the limits of understanding in black theological reflection's fourth historical stage is necessary.

For West, the critique of U. S. capitalism resulted in a praxis that was inadequate for promoting black liberation. According to West, the absence of an explicit social theory in this stage prevented black theologians from articulating and carrying out practical elements of socio-economic and political liberation. West's stated purpose for the present article is to correct the aforementioned lacks by engaging black theology in dialogue with progressive Marxist social theory in order to articulate black theological discourse which explicates relationships between capitalist civilization and black socioeconomic and existential oppression. He writes:

I claim that the present challenge to black theologians is to put forward an understanding of the Christian gospel in light of present circumstances which takes into account the complex ways in which racism (especially, white racism) and sexism (especially, male sexism) are integral to the class exploitative capitalist system of production as well as its repressive imperialist tentacles abroad; and to keep in view the crucial existential issues of death, disease, despair, dread and disappointment that each and every individual must face within the context of the present circumstances. (West, 1993a, p. 416)

West's article is then, an attempt to imbue prophetic black theology with progressive Marxist social theory while retaining what he feels to be positive aspects of the previous stages of black theology. In West's own words, he offers a re-articulation of black theology that ". . . preserves the positive content of its earlier historical stages, overcomes

its earlier (and inevitable) blindness and makes explicit its present challenges” (West, 1993a, p. 416). Positive content of black theology includes for West the notions that (a) white racism is a central aspect and defining feature of U. S. exploitative capitalism; (b) religion can either serve as opiate or source of struggle for liberation; and (c) the theological faith claim that “God sides with the oppressed and acts on their behalf” (p. 416).

West’s re-articulation of black theology includes both a Marxist critique and a theological critique of capitalist civilization that together explicate interconnections between capitalism occurring in the U. S. and abroad, socioeconomic exploitation, existential despair, and black American oppression.

### ***Marxist Critique of Capitalism***

West’s Marxist analysis presupposes that capitalism is a fundamentally undemocratic system because it allows producers no decision-making capacity regarding their product; as such, West argues that capitalism is antithetical to the socioeconomic well-being of the masses of producers living within capitalist systems. West further links capitalism to imperialism, arguing that multinational corporation profit margins are enhanced by controlling land and means of production in developing countries and by discouraging organizing efforts on the part of workers. For West, such tactics facilitate gross disparities in economics that exacerbate class inequalities. West then links imperialism to oppression, reasoning that the juxtaposition of capital accumulation by multinational corporations and the exclusion of workers from decision-making “. . . often leads to military rule and abominable oppression” (West, 1993a, p. 418) to protect the

interests of developed countries. Finally, West identifies four types of oppression (i.e., imperialist oppression, class exploitation, racial oppression, and sexual oppression) which form the contours of capitalist civilization and cause “. . . poverty, disease, lack of self-esteem, and despair [and] also the suppression of individuality . . .” (West, 1993a, p. 418).

West identifies both the Industrial Revolution and bourgeois political revolutions as paving the way for capitalist civilization because in each case, various forms of oppression were utilized to fuel the revolutions. In a discussion of the role oppression played in maintaining and perpetuating the ways of life required for capitalist civilization West (using the Americas and Britain as examples) writes:

Forms of class exploitation occurred in both the cotton plantations in the Americas and in the mines in Britain; imperialist oppression took place in Britain’s control of territory, resources and people in the Americas; racism provided the chief ideological justification for the use of Africans as slaves in the Americas; and sexism was employed to defend the abuse of women on both the plantations in the Americas and within the mills in Britain. (1993a, p. 419)

Thus, West’s Marxist critique of capitalist civilization reveals the relationship between capitalism in the U. S. and black American oppression as symptomatic of an overarching capitalist civilization.

### ***Theological Critique of Capitalism***

West begins the theological dimension of his critique of capitalist civilization by articulating the theological commitments which inform his article. These include commitment to a Christian notion of the self-realization of individual within community,

a Christian notion of original sin, and an understanding of the gospel “. . . as inescapable penultimate tragedy and the persistent hope for ultimate triumph” (West, 1993a, p. 420).

The relationship of these commitments to West’s theological articulation will now be discussed.

*Self-realization of individuality within community.* West identifies as Christianity’s central theme the ‘principle of self-realization of human individuality within community’; although the articulation of this principle has, according to West, typically focused on salvation in heaven. West argues that the prophetic Christian tradition understands socioeconomic well-being (i.e. earthly salvation) and existential salvation to be of equal importance to God. Referring to this equality, West writes: “The notion of a transcendent, Wholly Other god before whom all men and women are equal endows the well-being and salvation of each person with equal value and significance” (1993a, p. 420). The maintenance of capitalist civilization, which exacerbates economic disparities and creates ways of life that breed disease and despair is for West, antithetical to the will of God—that every person have socioeconomic and existential salvation. It is therefore on the basis of the principle of self-realization of human individuality within community that West founds his critique of capitalist civilization and his demand for the liberation (both socio-economic and existential) of the working and underclass people living within capitalist civilization.

*Original Sin.* For West, a major aspect of human fallibility is a proclivity towards self-interested behavior that can be addressed but never completely overcome; this human fallibility is an outcome of original sin. To guard against human selfishness, West



advocates the creation of a socialist civilization “. . . in which the socioeconomic well-being, political liberties, cultural diversity and existential salvation (if chosen) of persons is promoted . . .” (West, 1993a, p. 421) through the democratic participation of all people in the decision-making processes relevant to institutions that regulate their lives. West argues that such participation is required to promote human accountability, provide some measure of protection against human fallibility, and in doing these things, facilitates well-being.

*Gospel as tragedy and hope for triumph.* The notion of original sin also frames West’s understanding of the gospel as penultimate tragedy. The tragic aspect of humanity is, for West, condemnation to a “. . . life-and-death struggle between good and evil, forces of liberation and forces of oppression . . .” (West, 1993a, p. 422) that one must either side with or against, while simultaneously dealing with the existential realities of disease, dread, despair, and death. West admits that a socialist civilization will not relieve the tragic aspects of humanity, but he feels such a civilization will be preferable to capitalist civilization; the establishment of such a system is therefore, a cause worth dying for. He writes:

I believe this socialist civilization will neither perfect human beings nor eliminate many of the tragic aspects of being human. But it will be much better than our deplorable, abominable capitalist civilization. I also believe that it is a historical possibility, not a historical necessity, that this socialist civilization will be established. And given the most probable means of establishing it—namely, ultimately by some form of armed struggle—it may be unlikely that a socialist civilization, which reflects the best of both traditions, will ever be established. But for the committed prophetic Christian or progressive Marxist, it is a cause worth dying for. (West, 1993a, p. 422)

For West (1993a), the hope of ultimate Christian triumph is that amidst the socioeconomic and existential tragedy of human life, God will provide for the self-realization of each individual within community; the hope of socialist triumph is that historical progress will eventually produce a system of life that is preferable to monopoly capitalism.

Having discussed the intent and content of West's article, the focus of this analysis will now shift to an identification of the ideological implications of West's work. This discussion will center on three emergent themes: (a) the notion that God sides with the oppressed, (b) the concept of original sin and the possibility of salvation, and (c) the theological implications of West's marriage of Christianity and progressive Marxism.

### ***God Sides with the Oppressed***

It is somewhat surprising that, given West's stated aims to improve upon the historical limitations of black liberation theology, he nevertheless retains James Cone's contention that God sides with the oppressed in their liberation struggle. Admittedly, West, expands Cone's criteria for who is oppressed from blackness to ". . . the poor, oppressed, exploited, and degraded . . . the working classes and underclass of capitalist civilization" (West, 1993a, p. 422). Yet West, like Cone, also privileges black Americans as exemplifying the condition of oppression. Explaining this designation for black Americans he writes:

I suggest that the adjective "black" describe a crucial aspect of the theological dimension of my critique of capitalist civilization because the role and plight of black people in the emergence, duration, and decline of capitalist civilization symbolize the underside of capitalist civilization—the working classes and underclass of this civilization. (West, 1993a, p. 422)

Thus whether one utilizes the physical experience of blackness advocated by Cone or the symbolic experience of blackness advocated by West, implicit in the notion that God sides with the oppressed is also the notion of divine partiality for black Americans. The logical complications of such divine partiality was discussed previously in this chapter relevant to the reality of interconnected spheres of domination (i.e. all of humanity is oppressed and privileged in some way). It is important to note that the argument here is not for unbridled relativity such that all are oppressed hence none are oppressed. James Cone (1975) was right to worry about the damages of this sort of politically irresponsible relativism. Yet the suggestion that God is partial to oppressed black Americans sways too far in the opposite direction—towards irresponsible absolutism that inevitably constrains human agency for change (hooks, 2003a).

Not all black theologians have found the notion that God sides with the oppressed to be a liberating message for black Americans. In her pioneering womanist discourse, “*Sisters in the Wilderness: The challenge of womanist God-talk*,” Delores Williams (1993), like West, is acutely sensitive to the devastating effects of capitalism on black life. Unlike West, however, Williams does not connect the notion of God’s partiality for the oppressed with black liberation. She argues, in fact, that uncritical appropriation of this notion is detrimental to black Americans.

In her book, Williams interrogates the validity of the Bible as source for the faith claim that God sides with the oppressed. Williams discusses biblical texts (i.e. Genesis, Galatians, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Jeremiah) that, when read from the point of view of non-Hebrew slaves, reveal “. . . a non-libratory thread running through the

Bible” (Williams, 1993, p. 144). Speaking specifically of this oppressive thread Williams writes:

The point here is that when non-Jewish people (like many African-American women who now claim themselves to be economically enslaved) read the entire Hebrew testament from the point of view of the non-Hebrew slave, there is no clear indication that God is against their perpetual enslavement. Likewise, there is no clear opposition expressed in the Christian testament to the institution of slavery . . . The fact remains: slavery in the Bible is a natural and un-protested institution in the social and economic life of an ancient society—except on occasion when the Jews are themselves enslaved. One wonders how biblically derived messages of liberation can be taken seriously by today’s masses of poor, homeless African Americans, female and male, who consider themselves to be experiencing a form of slavery—economic enslavement by the capitalist American economy. (1993, p. 146)

Because the Bible produces at best, equivocal messages about God’s liberatory actions against oppression, Williams argues that black theology’s appropriation of the election/exodus experience and the resulting notion of God’s partiality for the oppressed provide an inappropriate framework for black American liberation.

Also critical of black theology’s faith claim of God’s partiality for black Americans is Itumeleng Mosala. Like Williams (1993), Mosala (1993) argues that God’s siding with the oppressed is but one of competing biblical truths. By claiming the entirety of the Bible as suggestive of God’s desire for black liberation, Mosala argues that black theologians are errantly appropriating a ruling-class (i.e. hegemonic) ideology which runs counter to black liberation efforts. The results are, according to Mosala, problems of theological validity. Discussing the problematics associated with black theology’s faith claim that the word of God supports black Americans’ struggle for liberation (i.e., that God sides with oppressed blacks) he writes:

The abstract exegetical starting point of Black Theology leads inevitably to problems about the validity of the particularistic character of this theology. If the “Word of God” transcends boundaries of culture, class, race, sex, etc., how can there be a theology that is concerned primarily with the issues of a particular race? Conversely, if black people are right when they claim that in their struggle for liberation Jesus is on their side, how can the same Jesus remain the supreme universal disclosure of the “Word of God”? (Mosala, 1993, p. 250)

Taken together, the expositions of Williams (1993) and Mosala (1993) reveal serious problems with West’s contention that God’s sides with oppressed black Americans. Admittedly, some theologians (see for example, Walker, 1993) have attempted to resolve the contradiction of an all-loving, transcendent God who sides with the oppressed by blurring distinctions between oppressors and oppressed. Such theologians have argued that by siding with the oppressed God also is siding with the oppressors; through the liberation of the oppressed, oppressors also receive their liberation (i.e. humanity). As theoretically appealing as such arguments are, the fact remains that it is logically impossible to identify humans who are completely oppressed or who are oppressors in every aspect of their identities. In so much as the binary between oppressors and oppressed is maintained (i.e. the oppressed are good and the oppressors are evil), God’s partiality for the oppressed necessitates bias against oppressors. Where distinctions between oppressor and oppressed are blurred, the question of *who* God actually sides with persists. Neither formulation appears to be suggestive of God siding with the oppressed *and* their oppressors.

More importantly, given the exposition of black theologians such as Williams (1993) and Mosala (1993) that biblical witness also presents a God who is not partial to the oppressed, the counterargument made by William Jones (1973)—that God is a white

racist<sup>26</sup>—appears to be a more historically supported conclusion than the notion of God siding with black Americans. Consequently, the argument for God’s partiality for black Americans seems, inescapably problematic.

### ***Original Sin and Salvation***

In the analysis of *God of the Oppressed*, it was argued that one of the implications of Cone’s black/white, good/bad binary was that black American suffering had to be presented as both good and bad. To the extent that Cone (1975) presented black suffering for liberation as ‘joyous’ he was necessarily forced to downplay the physical aspects of black suffering. In the present article, West (1993a) argues that the downplaying of the physical aspects of suffering (i.e. dread, disease, despair, and death) limited the liberatory power of earlier articulations of black theology. West counters this lack by emphasizing these very real aspects of suffering in his 1993a essay. In doing so, however, West runs into a complication of a different sort—the difficulty of articulating the possibility of salvation in conjunction with the notion of original sin.

For West (1993a), the Christian notion of original sin suggests that humans (through a basic drive to stay alive) are predisposed to selfish, self-interested behavior. To counter these selfish proclivities and subsequently facilitate self-realization within community (i.e. salvation), West advocates democratic participation of the masses in a ‘socialist civilization.’ The realization of a socialist civilization, West argues, would provide humanity the best opportunity for salvation by promoting “. . . socioeconomic

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<sup>26</sup> This was a philosophical exercise by Jones; he did not actually subscribe to a belief in divine racism.

well-being, political liberties, cultural diversity, and (if chosen) existential salvation”

(West, 1993a, p. 421).

Although this socialist system is the best chance humanity has at earthly salvation, West discusses his skepticism that such a socialist civilization will ever be realized. He states:

I believe this socialist civilization will neither perfect human beings nor eliminate many of the tragic aspects of being human. But it will be much better than our deplorable, abominable capitalist civilization. I also believe that it is a historical possibility, not historical necessity, that this socialist civilization will be established. And given the most probable means of establishing it—namely, ultimately by some form of armed struggle—it may be that a socialist civilization . . . will ever be established. But for the committed prophetic Christian or progressive Marxist, it is a cause worth dying for. (West, 1993a, p. 422)

Thus, for West, the reality of original sin necessitates that the realization of earthly salvation is decidedly unlikely. Moreover, West emphasizes that each human must face “. . . the inescapable realities of human death, disease, despair, dread, and disappointment” (West, 1993a, p. 422). West’s emphasis on the reality of death suggests a finality that leaves little room for otherworldly salvation. Thus, in West’s model it appears that both earthly salvation and otherworldly salvation are not likely to be realized. West does state that for Christians, the hope of ultimate triumph (that is, otherworldly salvation) “. . . is founded on the paradoxical revelation of a transcendent God in historical clothing, who best exemplifies our humanity and provides for our fullest self-realization within community” (West, 1993a, p. 422). One is left to wonder, however, how this Christian hope might be realized in earthly or otherworldly form, given West’s emphasis on the reality/finality of death and the fallible nature of humanity.

One is also left to wonder how any hope is obtained from this model. West's no nonsense theology could be mistaken as an opiate, but neither does it readily encourage liberation. Why would someone be willing to fight to the death for a cause with so little hope of earthly or otherworldly victory? In light of West's understanding of original sin—that humanity is genetically wired for selfish behavior—why would anyone sacrifice their lives for human betterment if they are unlikely to reap benefits from their struggle? How are the committed Christians and progressive Marxists, whom West identifies as pledged to the struggle for socialist civilization, able to overcome the constraints of original sin? Are they also acting out of self-interest and, if so, must we not also be cautious of their desire for socialist civilization? West's desire for an accurate theology of suffering, struggle, and the existential realities of life has seemingly resulted in articulations of death and salvation that seem incapable of sustaining a liberation struggle.

Here it is helpful to revisit James Cone's treatment of death and salvation in *God of the Oppressed*. Cone argued that death was not real for black Americans; through a vertical encounter they gained knowledge that they had “. . . a freedom not made with human hands” (Cone, 1975, p. 140) and that through Christ's resurrection, they would also triumph over death. This necessarily led Cone to downplay physical suffering and death because victory over those forces was guaranteed. Black Americans could, in Cone's (1975) view, joyously fight to the death because ultimate victory was already won. When consideration is given to West's exposition that no salvation of any kind is guaranteed, Cone's argument that death is not real for black Americans becomes more



understandable. If earthly salvation is not likely (and on this, Cone and West both agree), the oppressed need more than West's exposition to look forward to. Second generation black theologian Dwight Hopkins (1997) discusses the psychological need of the oppressed for the concept of Christian telos (i.e. salvation). He writes:

Telos helps the downtrodden to hold on in the absurdity of a world gone mad with cut-throat competitions in the economy, the popular culture, family, personal relations, and the church. If the locked out voices did not have a telos that promised that though evil might last through the night, joy comes in the morning . . . then people without power, whether racial, gender, sexual, class, may as well go insane. (Hopkins, 1997, p. 216)

West's formulation offers very little for oppressed individuals to look forward to. Consequently, West's model seems to hold little practical means of encouraging liberation struggles.

Admittedly, West provides a counter-argument to this critique of this essay in another of his works: *Prophesy of Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (1982). In that book, West provides a disclaimer of sorts regarding the difficulty of discerning the 'truth' of faith claims. In the following quote, he argues that intellectual arguments are insufficient criteria for assessing faith claims. He states:

. . . the justification, confirmation, or validation of the Christian faith rests upon the extent to which it promotes the valuing of certain insights, illuminations, capacities, and abilities in order to confront honestly and cope effectively with the ineluctable vicissitudes and unavoidable limit situations in life. (West, 1982, p. 96)

Held to his own criteria, however, it is still difficult to see how West's model provides the courage and hope necessary to navigate the bleak circumstances he describes.

### ***Marriage of Black Theology and Progressive Marxism***

West uses elements of progressive Marxism to supplant perceived lacks in black theology—particularly the absence of sophisticated social analysis that places racism in the context of capitalist civilization. Although this marriage allows West to brilliantly articulate linkages between racism, U. S. capitalism, and imperialism, there are elements of Marxism that seem fundamentally incompatible, or at best only marginally compatible, with Christianity.

West (1982) states that Orthodox Marxist analysis misses the mark in terms of identifying the 'reason' for religion and culture. This perspective, says West, understands culture as a 'hoax' played on workers by the ruling class and views religion as a tool for pacification and domination. In contrast to the Marxist view of religion, black theologians believe black theology to be an authentic expression of the black experience with positive, liberatory aspects. One wonders what it means when a perspective (i.e., Marxism) that discredits religion is used to supplant black theology. Asked differently, how (if at all) is the integrity of black theology damaged by a marriage to progressive Marxism when Marxism views the black theological faith claim of a transcendent God who breaks into human history as false consciousness and black theologians view this faith claim as an all-encompassing reality?

At issue here is a global question of appropriation—one that implicates each of the works analyzed in this chapter. What are the ideological implications of such appropriations? West (1982) suggests that a major flaw in orthodox Marxism was its dependence on the scientific method which, according to West, revealed an implicit desire to control, manipulate, and master. If such desire was a fundamental element of Marxist analysis, is progressive Marxism tainted by the same will to control and master? Is it possible to appropriate themes, theoretical perspectives, phrases, biblical motifs, etc. from their source without also appropriating the oppressive ‘blueprints’ of the thought?

As previously mentioned, Delores Williams (1993) suggests that an uncritical appropriation of the Hebraic Exodus motif has caused black theologians to so completely identify with ancient Hebrews that traces of oppressive human interactions (i.e. rendering black women invisible in black theology) have been appropriated as well. A similar caution has been leveled by Sheryl Sanders (1993) regarding black women theologians’ appropriation of the term womanist to frame theological insights. Appropriated from a term author Alice Walker used in her book *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, Sanders argues that the term ‘womanist’ is not centered on notions of the sacred and also condones sexual ethics (i.e. lesbianism) that discourage the realization of wholeness and unity in the black community.

The concerns of Williams (1993) and Sanders (1993), in conjunction with the present concerns about West’s marriage of black theology and progressive Marxism, are ideologically significant. All knowledge is constrained by social a priori (Cone, 1975; Hopkins, 1997). It is within this context that the importance of language becomes

evident. Given the social, economic, and political circumstances (i.e. social a priori) that give rise to language, it is not far-fetched to argue, as Heidegger did, that rather than speaking language, language speaks us (Quigley, 1998). That is, the language that we use constrains us—it reveals our positionality and our social a priori. Thus, when theories, motifs, phrases, etc. are appropriated and relayed orally or aurally, we become “. . . over-determined by the social and personal traditional constructs of human interaction” (Hopkins, 1997, p. 217) within which context language is formed. Concretely, this suggests that in his appropriation of Marxist social analysis, West necessarily receives the traces of control, and manipulation he identified as belonging to Marxist analysis. Given the over-determination of the social a priori, how could it be otherwise?

While there is no definitive answer to the problem of language, social context, and appropriation, the argument here is for recognition that all appropriation should be undertaken *critically*. Otherwise the ideological baggage that accompanies the appropriation may prove to be more burdensome (i.e. oppressive) than liberatory. It remains to be seen whether West’s marriage of black theology and progressive Marxism will prove to be the former or the latter.

### ***Concluding Thoughts on Black Theology as a Critique of Capitalist Civilization***

The critique presented here of Cornel West’s (1993a) work should not overshadow the vast contributions his essay has made to black theological discourse. Although West’s project was certainly ambitious, the breadth and scope of black theological issues accurately covered in his essay was exceptional. Yet West’s delineation of the previous limitations of black theology, though highly accurate, failed to

include notions of original sin and the faith claim that God sides with the oppressed as additional limitations to black religious discourse. As previously discussed in this chapter, West's contention that God sides with the oppressed is neither adequately supported biblically (Mosala, 1993; Williams, 1993) nor is it logical when the complexities of race/ethnic, gender, economic, social, and political oppression are acknowledged. Moreover, when the full implications for human relationships are considered, West's maintenance of the doctrine of original sin provides little motivation for or explanation of the human struggle for social transformation. These notions, consequently, hold little actual liberatory value.

**Jacquelyn Grant: "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship"**

**(1993)**

In contrast to Cornel West's macro-structural analysis, womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant offers an analysis that is micro-structural in nature. Her black theological discourse focuses on the impingements of a capitalist, patriarchal system of domination on the lives and liberatory options of black women. Hypothesizing that an unqualified usage of servant language in black theological discourse exacerbates the economic and emotional exploitation of black women, Grant's (1993) essay explores the relationship between servant language and black women's oppression. Due to unresolved tensions in Grants (1993) work, she revisits her exploration of servant language in a (1999) essay. In order to honor the progression of thought between these two works, both will be discussed in the deconstructive analysis that follows.

Womanist scholar Jacquelyn Grant's essay "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship" (1993) questions the appropriateness of the use of servant language in Christianity. Although much work has been done by feminists exploring the problematics of servant language relevant to the Christian faith (see for example Russell, 1979), Grant's work explores servant language relevant to the particular social, historical, and cultural framework of black women Christians. In contrast to the work of some feminists who have identified the potentially oppressive nature of servant language for women in general, Grant uncovers the particularized oppressive nuances of servant language as they relate to black women's historical experiences of slavery and present experiences of 'socio-economic enslavement' (Williams, 1993). For Grant (1993), these experiences make black women's relationship to servant language qualitatively different from the experiences of white women. Thus, Grant's essay is a critique of traditional usages of servant language, and also feminist re-formulations that assume the universality of women's experiences without consideration to the very different life experiences of white women and women of color and particularly the historical servant relationship between these groups.

Grant begins her essay by complicating feminist attempts to liberate servant language. Such re-formulations have, according to Grant, involved making theoretical distinctions between terms such as 'service' and 'servant.' Yet for Grant, the fact that such reformulations retain concepts of suffering and service as integral themes is problematic. Grant argues that the disproportionate representation of black women (historically and in the present) as domestic servants suggests that theoretical distinctions

between the terms service and servant hold little meaning for black women who experience service and servanthood synonymously (Grant, 1993). In the following quote, Grant explores ways in which servant language under-girds the oppression of black women. She writes:

. . . how does one justify teaching a people that they are called to a life of service when they have been imprisoned by the most exploitative forms of service? Service and oppression of Blacks went hand in hand. Therefore, to speak of service as empowerment, without concrete means or plans for economic, social, and political revolution that in fact leads to empowerment, is simply another form of ‘over spiritualization.’ It does not eliminate real pain and suffering, it merely spiritualizes the reality itself. It’s one thing to say that people spiritualize in order to ‘make it through the days, weeks, and months’ of agony. But it is another to give the people a ‘pie in the sky’ theology, so that they would concern themselves with the next world in order to undergird the status quo. The one can be seen as liberating while the other is oppressive. (Grant, 1993, p. 209)

For Grant, chattel slavery created a servant/master relationship between blacks and whites that influenced biblical interpretation. She argues that a similar servant/master relationship between black domestic servants and white women has influenced feminist theological perspectives. Thus for Grant, the question of the appropriateness of servant language for black women can only be situated within the lived experience of black women. In the following passage, Grant articulates the historical context and the present political implications of servant language for black women. In so doing, she gets to the heart of the theological dilemma of black Americans who embrace servant language. She asks:

. . . how do you propose that we are called to service to Jesus, the one who has been sent by God to redeem us, when both God and Jesus have been principle weapons in the oppressors’ arsenal to keep Blacks and Black women in their

appropriate place? Both God and Jesus were portrayed as white and male and interested primarily in preserving the white patriarchal and racist status quo . . . Is God actually responsible for the systematic pain and suffering of Blacks and women? Does God condone the servant-hood relationships between Blacks and women? If we are unwilling or unable to accept the proposition implied in an affirmative response to these questions, then how are the redeemers liberated from the oppressive structures of the oppressor? (Grant, 1993, p. 210)

Thus Grant's essay turns to theodicy as she attempts to make sense of historical experiences of service and servanthood for black women in light of God's will for their well-being and liberation.

Understanding that a direct relationship exists between culture and power, Grant argues that those in control of the dominant culture (i.e. white males) also control language; thus, the theological language produced by white males has been advantageous to them at the expense of women (Grant, 1993). Grant further argues that the juxtaposition of theological language with political interests by those in power resulted in the use of theological language to undergird political and social agendas.

Given the tainted (i.e. politically motivated) nature of servant language, Grant argues that new language is needed which “. . . challenges the servant mentality of the oppressed peoples and the oppressive mentality of the oppressors” (Grant, 1993, p. 211). Toward this aim, she proposes a new theoretical reformulation based on W.E.B. DuBois notion of two-ness—a double consciousness possessed by black people that provides insight into the oppressor's perspective. Grant utilizes DuBois' concept of black double consciousness and, in turn, posits a triple consciousness for black women wherein they have the psychological capacity to “. . . live in two or more worlds at the same time” (Grant, 1993, p. 212). The illuminations Grant receives through her re-formulation cause



her to reconsider the harmful effects of servant language on black women; she subsequently argues that black women's triple consciousness allows them to liberate servant language. The following passage from Grant is quoted at length to convey the logical progression of her reconsideration. She writes:

When I consider the 'twoness' or 'double' nature of the Black consciousness (and in fact the triple nature of Black women's consciousness), I am able to reconsider my thesis that this servanthood theme in Christianity needs to be eliminated from Christian theology . . . The triple consciousness of Black women makes it possible to see how they were able to liberate redemption as they overtly and covertly challenged the assumption of the racist and sexist status quo. That triple consciousness gave them the possibility of experiencing a liberating Jesus even as they were given a racist and sexist one. It enabled me to better understand how Black women relegated to domestic service could go to church on Tuesday, Wednesday nights and Sunday morning and testify of being a better servant of the Lord and Savior Jesus. . . . Perhaps what these Black women were saying is that what 'I am forced to do on Monday through Saturday is redemptive only in the sense that it facilitates survival' . . . True redemption takes place when one experiences the redeemer even as it is in the context of oppression. Their speaking of such titles as Lord and Master with regard to Jesus and God meant that the lords and masters of the white world were illegitimate. (Grant, 1993, p. 213)

Despite her seemingly whole-hearted endorsement of servant language, Grant appears to still harbor concern about its usage. She admits that although black women's triple consciousness provides them the capability of receiving liberating messages in servant language, such language may still need to be challenged in the broader interests of liberation (Grant, 1993).

For Grant, being a servant of God is suggestive of efforts to eliminate oppression; she reasons that if oppressors are unable to see the liberating aspects of servant language, liberatory chances diminish. Thus, while advocating servant language as appropriate for the survival of black women, Grant suggests that discipleship language may be a more

appropriate liberation tool for all people. For Grant theological language suggestive of an invitation to discipleship is politically preferable to language that suggests an invitation to servanthood, particularly for black women who have not traditionally been invited to Christian discipleship in the black church, but rather to service (Grant, 1993). Discussing the barriers keeping black women from becoming full members of the black church, Grant writes: “The truth of the matter, however, is that when women ‘join the church,’ they are not allowed to become full members, with all of the rights and privileges invested therein; rather, they are only permitted to become servants” (1993, p. 214). Thus, for Grant, discipleship language (as opposed to servant language) creates liberatory spaces for black women.

Grant cautions that discipleship can only lead to liberation when it is inclusive of both black women’s relationship with God and with community. She therefore identifies issues that must be addressed in order for black women to engage in liberating discipleship. These areas include the usage of conciliatory language to hide oppressive relationships and the true affirmation of all humanity to dissolve oppressive relationships. These areas will now be discussed in greater detail.

Grant argues that terms such as ‘community’ and ‘reconciliation’ cannot be realistically discussed when issues of racism, sexism, and class oppression persist. If such conciliatory language is not substantiated by actions of justice, Grant argues that such language may mirror traditional domestic service relationships wherein the dominant culture determines the criteria for community as well as the terms of reconciliation. Grant (1993) writes:

All too often, notions of reconciliation, covenantal relationship, unity, and community mirror those in the system of domestic service relationship. The need of one group (partner) are universalized in such a fashion that those on the topside of history are the beneficiaries of the system; and those on the underside of history are the mere victims of the relationship. Topped people often presume knowledge of the answers; consequently, they invalidate even the questions of those who live on the underside of history. (p. 215)

Grant (1993) further cautions that Christianity's preoccupation with the language of reconciliation may need to be put aside in favor of focused energy on the elimination of the structures that block reconciliation. For this to happen, Grant argues that servant relationships between humans must be dismantled. For Grant, this elimination ". . . means that women will no longer shoulder the responsibility of service. Oppressed people, women of color, men of color will no longer be relegated to the place of servanthood and servitude" (Grant, 1993, p. 215). At the root of these structures is, for Grant, reluctance to affirming the humanity of all people. Such affirmation is, for Grant, the first step in transcending structures of oppression so that black women and all people can enter into discipleship with Christ.

Grant's essay is an insightful analysis of the ways in which lack of attention to impaired human relationships can reinforce master/servant ideologies that block liberation attempts. Additionally, her essay points to the dangers of short-sighted focus on conciliatory language in the absence of dedicated efforts towards repaired human relationships and justice. Despite Grants, brilliant analysis relevant to liberation, reconciliation, and black women's well-being, her support of servant language and black women's triple consciousness as tool of survival is, nevertheless, problematic. The focus of this analysis will now shift to a discussion of the ideological implications of Grant's

essay. This discussion involves two themes: black women's triple consciousness and the master/slave meta-narrative.

***Black Women's Triple Consciousness***

In describing black experiences of double-consciousness, DuBois negatively characterizes this survival strategy as:

. . . the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two warring souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Dubois, 1969, p. 49)

If the psychological impact of the double consciousness threatens to tear the black American asunder, one is left to wonder about the psychological consequences of a triple consciousness (i.e. American, black, and female) on the well-being of black women. Yet Grant promotes the usage of black women's triple consciousness as a viable means of liberating servant language from its oppressive history. Given black women's triple consciousness, Grant suggests that servant terminology remains an appropriate language for black women's survival in particular and for black liberation theology in general.

In order to retain this argument, Grant is forced to engage in mental gymnastics. She acknowledges the oppressive nature of servant language, yet maintains that black women's experiences in America (i.e. their oppression) created an appropriate framework for them to derive liberatory visions out of these oppressive messages. Stated differently,

the coping mechanisms produced out of black women's suffering resulted in positive ends. Presented in this light, Grants essay is an argument for redemptive suffering.

The fact that black women developed survival strategies for navigating oppressive systems should not diminish the reality of their oppressive circumstances. The triple consciousness of black women—which afforded them knowledge of the oppressors' point of view—was only necessary *because* they were oppressed. Had they not been oppressed they would not need liberation; had they not been given tainted biblical messages to keep them oppressed, they would not need to redeem those messages. To glorify the fact that black women were somehow able to receive liberating messages in spite of their oppression seems to take focus off the actual oppression they endured. Instead, focus is placed on the 'exceptionalism' (West, 1982) of black women. Such a meta-narrative of exceptionalism implies that black women are especially suited for dealing with their oppressive circumstances. The sad reality of such exceptionalist claims is that the onus of responsibility for change is placed on the sufferers. To state this point bluntly, why would anyone need to worry about eliminating black women's oppression? If these "super women" have the ability to redeem Christianity, and liberate Jesus, surely they can liberate themselves from oppression.

The fact remains, however, that black women—without the assistance of all other members of the human race—cannot liberate themselves, their religion, or their Jesus. They can survive, as they have historically done, within the oppressive system, but they cannot transcend it. Thus, to suggest that black women 'constantly liberate Jesus' may be well-intentioned, but when black women are in actuality the 'oppressed of the oppressed'

(hooks, 2003; Williams, 1993) the position is ultimately destructive. Such a message encourages others to expect super human achievements from black women and also encourages guilt in black women who are unable to live up to these societal expectations.

*Master/Servant Meta-narrative*

Most troubling about this essay is arguably the persistence of a master/servant theme that disputes Grant's stated purpose for her re-articulations. Grant (1993) ultimately argues that black women embraced servant language as a way to protest the earthly status quo. Black women's support of God as lord and master meant that white masters were illegitimate (Grant, 1993). Significantly, the master changes in Grant's model, but black women remain servants. Regardless of who they are serving, they are always in service to others. Implicit in this model is the suggestion of ontological servitude—that black women are created to be servants.

While 'God the Master' may be preferable to whites as masters, the black body remains subject to an authority not her or his own. Servanthood, so conceived, implies coercion more than choice. Rather than freely seeking to partner with God, Grant's model suggests that black women, given the inevitability of being mastered, choose to be mastered by a deity instead of earthly oppressors. The ironic twist here is that black women actually (following Grant's logic) save the Savior in order to be servants to a divine master. Such an exposition advocates, at best, limited liberatory messages for black women. If black women are indeed doing the work of liberation by 'redeeming the Redeemer' (Grant, 1993, 213) can they not conceive of themselves as being in relationships of partnership or friendship with God as opposed to servanthood? Such re-

conceptualizations, it seems, hold more liberatory possibilities for helping black women to understand themselves in relationships of mutuality rather than subjugation.

**Jacquelyn Grant: “Servanthood Revisited: Womanist Explorations of Servanthood Theology” (1999)**

It is plausible that Grant’s (1993) ultimate decision to attribute positive connotations to servant language for black women did not sit well with her womanist and emancipatory sentiments. It is not surprising then, that in 1999, she revisited her earlier analysis of servant language. In Grant’s first work, she argued that black women, by their moral virtue, redeemed servant language from its tainted origins (Grant, 1993). Unlike her 1993 essay, Grant’s 1999 essay: “Servanthood Revisited: Womanist Explorations of Servanthood Theology” pays serious attention to the problematics that arise when “. . . political and social language and interests are used to give content to theological language” (Grant, 1999, p. 135). Recognizing that such a conflation of theological teachings and oppressive political agendas has been the condition of American Christianity for much of U. S. history, Grant (1999) identifies the core issue thwarting liberation as relational. Specifically, she argues that human tendencies towards domination must be transformed through the adoption of new symbol systems and language patterns that contest domination and dehumanization. Discussing the need for such a transformation, she writes:

Christianity in all of its majesty, has not enabled us to solve basic relational problems. I contend that this is related to distortions of doctrinal issues such as the doctrine of humanity. As long as some people are always more servants than others, the destructive relationships will continue. As long as both divinity and humanity are held captive to the limitations of human sinful need for control and

domination, we will never liberate humanity, Jesus Christ, and God. (Grant, 1999, p. 135)

In many ways, Grant's 1999 essay highlights a central problem identified by James Cone in *God of the Oppressed* (1975)—how to articulate liberating expressions of divinity capable of transcending seemingly intractable human proclivities toward domination. For Cone (1975), the solution was a theology that articulated salvation in existential terms (i.e. blacks knowing themselves to be free in their minds) and which delayed ultimate liberation for an undisclosed future eschatological event. For Grant's part, she offers no new articulations of liberation. Instead, she questions whether Christ and Christianity can be liberated at all (Grant, 1999).

#### ***Concluding Thoughts on the Texts of Jacquelyn Grant***

The main critique of Grant's (1993) work also was leveled against M. Shawn Copeland's (1993) theology of suffering—that it is politically dangerous and psychologically irresponsible to present black women's survival strategies under conditions of oppression as salvific. Black women's survival strategies do not save the world; they do not save God and they certainly do not save black women. These strategies simply allow black women to function under oppressive circumstances. Survival, by its very nature, does not allow for transcendence.

Notwithstanding the considerable accomplishments black women have made historically in terms of surviving oppression, these accomplishments do not confer onto black women Christ-like status whereby they are transformed (through their suffering) into saviors of humanity. By lauding black women's exceptional abilities to withstand



suffering, the real horror of radical suffering endured by so many black women is de-emphasized. In doing this, Grant (albeit inadvertently) increases barriers to black women's well-being and liberation.

While Grant's (1999) essay offers no new libratory articulations, her lack of faith in the libratory power of existing systems of theological norms and language is noteworthy in that it reflects an awareness of persistent oppressive meta-narratives operating in black theological discourses. Grant's (1999) request for novel articulations of theological language capable of transcending the tainted historical relationships of domination and subjugation provides space for the introduction of new theological paradigms. Grant's (1999) recognition of the need for repairing human relationships of domination holds the promise that black women can be conceptualized, not as suffering Christ surrogates, but as people in need of salvation like the rest of humanity.

**Anthony Pinn: "Embracing Nimrod's Legacy: The Erotic, the Irreverence of Fantasy, and the Redemption of Black Theology" (2004)**

In the final article to be analyzed in this chapter, Anthony Pinn (2004) seeks the redemption of black theology. Like Grant (1999), Pinn's essay: "Embracing Nimrod's Legacy: The Erotic, the Irreverence of Fantasy, and the Redemption of Black Theology" (2004) also recognizes the oppressive hold normative structures of language and understanding currently enjoy in theology in general and black theological discourse specifically. His provocative essay seeks to dismantle the normative understandings of being in relationship that make possible the oppression of black bodies in male, female,

gay, lesbian, and transgender form. A critical analysis of Pinn's essay concludes this chapter.

In his 2004 article "Embracing Nimrod's Legacy: The Erotic, the Irreverence of Fantasy, and the Redemption of Black Theology," scholar of black religion and professor of religious studies, Anthony Pinn explores the significance of African American erotic realities for black theological reflection. Pinn argues that black theology's reliance on the Cartesian notion of a mind/body split has prevented black theological reflection from considering the role of the erotic in theological discourse. Because of this lack, Pinn argues that potential avenues of black liberation have been overlooked.

Using a definition of eros conceptualized by Paul Tillich, Pinn (2004) defines eros as an energy of connection making or union that facilitates the sustaining of relationships with people, thoughts, things, and the divine. While adherence to notions of Cartesian duality have, for Pinn, necessitated that black religious reflection focus on agape (love of God) and philia (love of neighbor), Pinn argues that agape ". . . is always erotically charged . . ." (Pinn, 2004, p. 163) because eros propels humans toward union with nature, culture, and the divine.

Lack of focus on the erotic in black theology is manifested, Pinn argues, in a lack of passion and deep engagement in the black liberation movement. On the necessary connections between agape, philia, and eros, Pinn writes:

Eros ties together the various relationships of meaning and pleasure that mark appreciation of self, contact with others and, for those who are theistic, the divine. And, it does so in ways that recognize the integrity of those encountered. In this sense eros properly conceived seeks to bring together and unite with agape and philia as a uniting of love, power, and justice. The erotic is the mark of

embodiment fully, but critically, embraced and celebrated as a way of holding in tantalizing tension the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of history. Without recognition of the erotic, the body loses its relational elasticity, so to speak. This situation of rigidity has ontological implications in that what it means to ‘be’ and be in connection to others, is minimized. (2004, p. 163)

In order for black theology to fully embrace what it means to be, Pinn suggests that the erotic dimension of black life must be acknowledged as an appropriate source for theological reflection. Such acknowledgement holds importance in two ways. First, it infuses black theology with a sense of irreverence that can call into question those structures that perpetuate normative assumptions about what constitutes proper relationships in black theological discourse. Second, by taking the irreverence of eros seriously, Pinn argues that black theology will gain a vulnerability “. . . that opens it to see the beauty in relationships and interactions that were once despised” (Pinn, 2004, p. 164). Here, Pinn refers specifically to black gay and lesbian relationships and interactions.

Pinn argues that black theology’s embrace of the imagination paradigm as a tool for liberation has necessitated reliance on the Cartesian mind/body split and has resulted in the absence of erotic realities from black theological reflection. For Pinn, imagination can encourage survival, but not liberation. It can allow one to re-order options within the status quo, but does not allow space for the transcendence of oppressive systems. Pinn argues that the use of imagination can only result in apologetics—responses to oppression—that are necessarily constrained by the systemic norms they oppose. Pinn crystallizes this notion in the following passage:

To imagine is to work one's passive will within a context which maintains something of the survival impulse. It is to be shadowed by the meta-narrative of the dominant social structure. Imagination, all things considered, is a rather polite mode of re-envisioning in that it does not call into question the elemental nature of the grammar of discourse. It is a rumbling within the social matrix that fails to challenge its basic design and intent because such disturbances do not radically compromise the intent of the social matrix. These disturbances simply create acceptable alternatives within the framework of the social order . . . imagination as the agent of liberation does not call into fundamental question the essential "realness" of the reality promoted by the dominant social system. (Pinn, 2004, p. 166)

Pinn (2004) offers the paradigm of fantasy as a corrective for black theology's lacks. He differentiates his notion of fantasy from that which other theologians (i.e. Harvey Cox and Sallie McFague) utilize in their discourse, referring to the latter as more akin to notions of fancy and imagination, respectively. Pinn's understanding of fantasy is closer in concept to the existential and is primarily concerned with subjectivity. Pinn demonstrates the liberating potential of his fantasy paradigm through an analysis of the legend of Nimrod, found in the book of Genesis in the Bible.

Given a "traditional" biblical reading, Nimrod (a descendant of Ham and one of the princes of the community where the tower of Babel was to be built) epitomized arrogance, selfishness, and ungodliness by attempting to unite people in a manner contrary to the will of God (Pinn, 2004). The following account of God's reaction to the people of Babel is taken from the book of Genesis.

Now the whole earth had one language and one speech. And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar and they dwelt there. Then they said to one another "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over

the face of the whole earth.” But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of the earth. (Genesis 11:1-9)

For Pinn (2004), a fantasy paradigm must inform human understandings of the nature and meanings of relationships. Thus from a fantasy paradigm, relevant data for the story of Nimrod centers on human relationships and the possibilities they hold. By embracing the fantasy paradigm, Pinn challenges constraining meta-narratives—even divine ones. Thus for Pinn, the legend of Nimrod, as presented in the Bible, is problematic because it “. . . does not . . . promote healthy life options; human ingenuity, creativity, and ambition result in destruction” (Pinn, 2004, p. 170). The fantasy paradigm allows Pinn to reject traditional understandings of Nimrod and the tower of Babel as well as traditional notions of divinity that serve as barriers rather than facilitators of human liberation. In the following excerpt, Pinn identifies the usefulness of the fantasy paradigm in identifying the ‘problem’ of the story of Nimrod. He writes:

Through a movement from the restrictive paradigm of imagination to the irreverence of fantasy new possibilities for living emerge. It becomes clear that existing social structures (including certain notions of divinity and divine will) seek to artificially limit human creativity and connectedness through a denial of relationships that threatens the system. Social arrangements—not Nimrod’s actions—are problematic. (Pinn, 2004, p. 170)

Pinn's text is complicated and provocative. His understanding of the limitations of imagination paradigms provides a useful heuristic for understanding the leaps and limits of the previous black theological texts analyzed in this chapter. It is important to note that Pinn's understanding of imagination is compatible with Cornel West's (1993) presentation of black theology's leaps and limits. For West, these leaps and limits were characterized by increased understanding in some instances and the persistence of blind spots in others to those sources of oppression having immediate impact on black life.

Utilizing Pinn's (2004) concept of imagination, it can be argued that black theology's reliance on the imagination paradigm has limited abilities to envision radical liberation possibilities. While an imagination paradigm could identify sources of oppression within the context of the established order (West's leap situations), it could not facilitate transcendence of the system of domination because it could not provide radical re-conceptualizations of the 'problems' and the 'solutions' (West's limit situations). As a result, all solutions were constrained by the ideology of the very problems they protested. Thus, in *God of the Oppressed*, Cone (1975) could not envision whiteness being otherwise than evil even though his theology was in large part a protest of essentialized notions of black inferiority. Copeland's (1993) meditation on the suffering endured by black women could not transcend the meta-narrative of redemptive suffering that implicitly condones such suffering. Neither could West's (1993) discourse conceptualize human relational possibilities other than war, selfishness, and self-interest even though the realization of his socialist civilization was contingent on alternative manifestations of human togetherness. Finally, Grant's (1993) essay could not relinquish the black

exceptionalism myth. As has been previously discussed, it was Grant's inability to envision radical re-conceptualizations of hierarchical relationships of domination that fueled the skepticism in her 1999 essay.

The limits in each of these scenarios can be understood as a failure of the imagination paradigm. Viewed this way, Pinn's suggested inclusion of a fantasy paradigm in black theology holds promise for transcending the limitations of current black theological discourse. A more fully developed discussion of the usefulness of a fantasy paradigm for this project will be provided in the following chapter. For now, concluding thoughts on Pinn's (2004) essay ends this chapter.

***Concluding Thoughts on “Embracing Nimrod’s Legacy”***

Beyond discussion of the imagination paradigm, however, Pinn's argument for the erotic as a source of black theology also is significant in that it calls attention to the current Cartesian duality (i.e. mind/body split) in black theology that limits libratory possibilities. Certainly, Pinn is not the only scholar to note the lack of embodied emphasis in black theological discourse. Nor is Pinn the only black theologian to entertain notions of the erotic as beneficial supplants for black theology.<sup>27</sup> Specifically, Dwight Hopkins (2004) and Karen Baker-Fletcher (2004) are both supportive of a move towards more embodied understandings of black theological reflections that take into consideration the power and potential of the erotic. For Baker-Fletcher (2004), failure to acknowledge the erotic in black theological discourse effectively limits understandings of the human-divine encounter because, for Christians, such encounters are erotic—indicative of one's desire

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<sup>27</sup> See , for example, Dyson (2004).

for union with “. . . that which is supremely beautiful, good, and true” (p. 201). Hopkins (2004) understands the erotic as an impetus to social justice expressed through the necessity of wholeness. He writes:

. . . eroticism includes sex; yet it surpasses sex by situating it within a fluid and broader framework. Eroticism works itself from the inside out. The inside consists of a transcendent life force, an integrated spirituality clinging sensuously to flesh. The flow of the force of life is communal and interactive among human, animal, and plant life, as well as the natural elements. It recognizes its cornerstone as the holy legacy of Black ancestors. Consequently, eroticism is history, knowledge, desire, pleasure, wholeness, and creativity. (pp. 188-189)

Thus, the spiritual life force manifested in the erotic seeks integration and wholeness in the ecological relationships that surround the individual and connect her or him with divinity. The erotic, so conceived, arguably compels humans to seek perfect union internally (i.e. an integrated self) and externally—with other humans and all other living things that inhabit the earth.

While Baker-Fletcher (2004) and Hopkins (2004) highlight benefits of embodied theology and the erotic for black theology broadly conceived, Pinn’s (2004) focus is more specific. He advocates the irreverence of the erotic as a way to create space for black Christian homosexuality. Numerous scholars have discussed the mind/body split which pervades and limits black theological reflection.<sup>28</sup> Sometimes referred to as a Cartesian duality or Platonized Christianity, the privileging of the mind and reason over emotions/bodily sensations and Christianity’s failure to perceive the body and soul in holistic terms (i.e. body as source of sin, unconnected to the soul) are both consequences

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<sup>28</sup> See, for example, Brown Douglass (2004) or Dyson (2004).



of a line of thinking that places the body in an antagonistic relationship with itself. Such thinking is exemplified by Christian slaveholders who argued that the salvation of black souls had no bearing on their earthly enslavement; slave bodies and souls were disconnected (Brown Douglass, 2004; Pinn 2002).

This line of thinking also promoted eroticized images of blackness in the ‘dominant discourse of white culture’ (Brown Douglass, 2004; Dyson, 2004); blacks were hyper-sexualized and ruled by emotion while whites were intellectual. Discussing the sexual exploitation of blackness Kelly Brown Douglass (2004) writes:

Overall, white cultural sexualization of Black people allowed for the Black body to be exploited in ways that benefited white racist society. Most importantly, it legitimated white supremacist ideology. The fact that Black people were deemed ruled by passion was sufficient proof that they were inferior to white people, a people ostensibly ruled by reason. Black people were considered people of the body/flesh, while white people were considered those of the intellect/soul. In this way, blackness became a sign of an “ardent” nature (that is sexual) at the same time that it signaled a lack of intellect. (p. 354)

In response to dominant white cultural discourse, many black Americans sought to resist the sexual stereotypes they were portrayed as. Ironically, such resistance often resulted in emulation of the white standards by which blacks were judged to be inferior. Dyson (2004) argues that the black Church adopted a conservative and repressive theology of sexuality based on Victorian ideals in order to “. . . rebut the myth of black sexuality being out of control” (Dyson, 2004, p. 225). While such a stance might appear overly conciliatory, the adoption of ‘white standards’ by oppressed blacks served as a strategy for invalidating the hegemony of white superiority (Roseboro & Ross, 2006).

However, the emulation of white sexual values constrained the liberatory potential of black theology, especially for homosexual Christians whose sexuality, perceived from Victorian standards, is taboo (Brown Douglass, 2004; Dyson, 2004; Pinn, 2004).

Pinn (2004) argues that focus on the erotic—an inappropriate focus according to the terms of Cartesian duality—introduces an irreverence that provides a radical break with constraining theological norms and standards. Such irreverence can break one out of normative modes of thought and allow space for fantastic re-conceptualizations for doing liberatory theology. At the individual level, such re-conceptualizations can allow space for the legitimization of homosexuality as an appropriate way of being in relationship (Pinn, 2004). The freeing of individuals to encounter divinity ‘as they are’ then promotes unity and wholeness on a global level. For Pinn, focus on the erotic encourages passion and deep engagement in human relationships and makes vulnerable the normative meta-narratives that relegate human relationships to binaries of superior/inferior, dominant/subjugated, acceptable/unacceptable, etc. Such passion can potentially transcend the relationships of domination that now plague humanity.

While Pinn’s exposition of the erotic and the irreverent are full of liberatory potential, they also raise concern. As demonstrated in his treatment of Nimrod’s Legacy, Pinn seems comfortable with the notion of God’s will/divine will being problematic for liberation efforts. This begs the question of the limits of Pinn’s irreverence in relation to the divine. Pinn’s (2004) irreverence enables the privileging of human relationships over God’s (supposed) will. Given this scenario, what is the purpose of acknowledging God’s will at all? Is God’s will only acknowledged when it is compatible with human goals and

aspirations? In other words, if God's will can be challenged and disregarded if necessary, why is God needed at all? What distinguishes Pinn's understanding of embodied theology from secular humanism? Does such conceptualization fall outside the boundaries of theology in general and black theology in particular? Finally, can one articulate an authentic 'black theology,' as Pinn attempts to do, which does not give primacy to the word of God?

Admittedly, Pinn's articulation opens black theology up to a slippery slope relevant to the boundaries and determinants of black theology. Yet given the understandable limitations of the black theological discourse analyzed in this chapter, Pinn's call for an eroticized, embodied theology based on the fantasy paradigm deserves further exploration. Hence, the focus of the following chapter will be on developing a framework for black theological discourse that builds upon previous limitations through the concepts of embodied theology and fantasy.

**CHAPTER IV**

**TOWARDS A FANTASTIC, EMBODIED, EMANCIPATORY BLACK THEOLOGY**

In the third chapter of this book, select black theological texts were analyzed in terms of libratory potential; all but one text (Anthony Pinn’s 2004 “Embracing Nimrod’s Legacy”) was found lacking in ability to transcend the oppressive structures critiqued. This chapter presupposes that the limitations of previous black theological texts can be overcome only by engaging in a radical break with previous conceptualizations of knowledge (as suggested by Pinn, 2004) that endorse binary oppositions, master/servant language, mind/body separation, notions of exceptionalism (i.e. redemptive suffering), and the resulting meta-narrative of ontological suffering of black bodies.<sup>29</sup> This phrase has been adapted from *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An essay on African American religious and cultural criticism* (1995) by Victor Anderson.<sup>30</sup> The articulation of a new

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<sup>29</sup> The phrase ‘ontological suffering of black bodies’ is coined here in reference to the theological discourses of James Cone (1975), M. Shawn Copeland (1993), Jacquelyn Grant (1993), and to some extent Cornel West (1993a) that, taken together, are suggestive of an overarching theme of black suffering as given, originary, presupposed, necessary, or teleological.

<sup>30</sup> Anderson (1995) implements the phrase ontological blackness in reference to tendencies in black and womanist theology towards racial reification and essentialism relevant to black life and experiences. While Anderson’s work in this area is quite helpful in identifying the ways in which black theology and womanist theology are circumscribed by the white racism they critique, Anderson fails to link the meta-narrative of redemptive suffering (which predates and strongly influences both black and womanist theology) to his concept of ontological blackness. In other words, ontological blackness is not simply a result of flawed theology, as Anderson suggests, but a response to a dominant worldview which presents the servitude and suffering of oppressed individuals, and in this case, black Americans as both given and beneficial. Because Anderson’s concept of ontological blackness fails to incorporate the ways in which the meta-narrative of redemptive suffering influences black and womanist theology and also influences other philosophical articulations (i.e. the liberation theology of Gustavo Gutierrez and the educational philosophy of Paulo Friere), the term ‘ontological suffering’ is instead adopted relevant to philosophical discussions of the

vision of black theological reflection capable of transcending the meta-narrative of ontological suffering of black bodies is the ambitious purpose of this chapter.

### **Fragments**

In an essay entitled “African American Thought: The Discovery of Fragments” David Tracy (1999) argues that fragments (as opposed to systematic conceptualizations) have always been present in black religious thought. For Tracy, these fragments, when acknowledged, allow novel and potentially liberating insights to be gained from history because they release the constraints associated with totalizing systems of thought. Tracy argues that any claims to totalizing systems carry with them implicit norms that silence, repress, and marginalize all themes that fail to fit systemic norms. Because fragments are erratic and disturbing, they shatter pretenses of universality and, in so doing, create spaces for marginalized themes to be heard (Tracy, 1999).

Tracy’s understanding of the libratory potential of fragments is useful here. While, there is a wealth of knowledge contained in historical articulations of black theology, the libratory potential of this knowledge is limited (as demonstrated in chapter three of this book) by numerous oppressive themes and meta-narratives adopted by each author. When considered in their entirety each text, except Anthony Pinn (2004), proved incompatible with the goals of the present project. Even Pinn’s (2004) work, though ripe with emancipatory potential, comes dangerously close to rejecting the need for God in human salvation and is consequently, also ultimately incompatible with the goals of this project. Utilizing Tracy’s conceptualization of black theology as fragments, those useful,

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suffering of oppressed individuals in general and term ‘ontological suffering of black bodies’ is adopted relevant to philosophical/theological discussions of black American suffering.

relevant, and compatible articulations of black theological discourse can be used to supplant this project's re-articulated black theological vision while all counter-libratory themes and meta-narratives can be rejected. This appropriation of fragments is beneficial because it opens spaces of possibility in the re-articulation of black theological discourse.

Applying this conceptualization of fragments to the black religious discourse presented in Chapters II and III, the initial pieces of a re-articulated black theological vision can be identified. The first fragment to be retained from Chapter II (history of black theological discourse) is the belief in human agency to wrestle with theology and to surmise instruction, meaning, and purpose for life from theological reflection. Also retained will be the conceptualization of God as beneficent and desirous of liberation for the oppressed. The belief that God is active in the liberation of the oppressed is, however, rejected.<sup>31</sup> While Howard Thurman's (1963) argument that one can derive value from suffering will be retained, it will be done cautiously because such an assertion is fraught with the danger of misinterpretation. Admittedly, some suffering, such as that which results from natural causes, is inevitable (Thurman, 1963) and one may indeed derive pedagogical benefits from it. However, neither pedagogical benefit nor redemptive value should be assigned to suffering that is a direct result of human volition;<sup>32</sup> to do so (as was argued in chapter three) is to ultimately sanction the suffering.

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<sup>31</sup> See Williams (1993) and Mosala (1993) for refutations against arguments for God's active involvement in the liberation of the oppressed.

<sup>32</sup> The extent to which suffering due to natural disasters (e.g., hurricanes, fire, etc.) can be attributed to human greed, sin/volition is debatable. Many theologians and critical educators argue that most human suffering results from the direct or indirect actions of human beings. For more on suffering from human volition and sin, see for example, Brock and Parker (2001); Park (1993; 2004); and Purpel and McLaurin (2004).

From Chapter III (textual analysis of select contemporary black theological texts) important fragments will be retained from each author. James Cone (1975) paved the way for challenging the given-ness of dominant presentations of Christianity. He demonstrated that reality can be successfully contested; thus for the present project, Cone's contestation of the presumed originary nature of particularized theological "realities" is retained. M. Shawn Copeland (1993) identified the Bible as potentially oppressive to the lives of Black women and subsequently called for selective biblical interpretations. Copeland's recognition of the need for selective appropriation is therefore retained for the present project. Cornel West (1982, 1993a) provided a concrete plan for liberation of the oppressed, refuted the supposition that racism was genetic, and identified the far-reaching consequences of monopoly capitalism. Thus, this project adopts the following fragments from the works of Cornel West: the necessity to articulate a theological vision that includes concrete means of liberation and an awareness of the interconnections between the exploitative economic structure of capitalism and other social/economic manifestations of oppression such as racism, sexism, homophobia, etc. Jacquelyn Grant (1999) recognized the need for changing the symbols and language that under-gird inequitable dominant/subordinate human relationships in order to foster social justice. This project takes from Grant's (1999) work, its ultimate goal: the repairing of human relationships through a fundamental shift in the conceptualization of human relationships of domination. Finally, Anthony Pinn (2004) recognized the need for an embodied theology and called for the introduction of irreverence and fantasy into theological discourse. Thus this project retains from Pinn (2004) the recognition that a

libratory theological vision must not be merely a conceptual activity, but must begin in the body through recognition of the real physical, mental, and psychological consequences of suffering for oppressed persons. Further, Pinn's call for fantastic, irreverent theology is taken seriously here; heading Pinn's call, the black theological vision for this project will build on the fragments of black theology discussed above and will be founded on the concept of fantasy. What follows, then, is a discussion of the 'fantastic' portion of this re-articulated black theological vision.

### **The Fantastic**

As its fifth entry for the word 'fantasy,' Merriam-Webster offers the following definition: "the power or process of creating especially unrealistic or improbable mental images in response to psychological need." (Merriam-Webster, 2006). This chapter proposes a new vision of black theology based on the Asian (particularly Korean) concept of Han—the psychological pain endured by victims of oppression (Park, 1993). That a non-black, non-Christian concept should form the basis of a new vision for black theology seems ridiculous when considered within present understandings (i.e. from Anthony Pinn's (2004) explanation of an imagination paradigm) yet has distinct advantages when understood from a fantasy paradigm. For better or worse, black theology developed out of experiences of racism, domination, and oppression; as such black theology is tied to the oppressive ideology of white racism and patriarchy. Stated differently, black theology cannot articulate a vision that transcends this oppressive ideology without articulating an alternative reality which provides a radical break with current understandings/conceptualizations of the status quo (Pinn, 2004). As discussed in



Chapter III, imagination allows the critique of oppressive structures, but not their transcendence. The introduction of the concept of Han provides the cultural and religious ‘jolt’ necessary for a radical break with the status quo. Yet as will be briefly discussed below, the racial and political experiences of Korean people and patriarchal experiences of Korean women share surprisingly painful commonalities with U. S. black Americans. As such, the concept of Han is readily applicable to the life experiences and salvific needs of black Americans.

#### **The Han of Koreans and the Han of U. S. Black Americans: Some Similarities**

Korea was formally annexed by Japan in 1910, though Japan had been highly involved in Korean political affairs years prior to formal annexation (U. S. Library of Congress, n.d.). After annexation, the Japanese occupied Korea and treated Koreans as a conquered people (U. S. Library of Congress, n.d.). The Japanese initiated various cultural attacks: literature was only printed in Japanese, Koreans were not allowed to organize politically, Koreans were encouraged to adopt Japanese religion and were also (humiliatingly from the point of view of the Korean people) made to replace their own surnames with Japanese ones (Fukuoka, 1996; Lambert, 2004; Park, 1996). Additionally, Korean historical archives, religious structures, and cultural artifacts were either destroyed or augmented to better reflect Japanese culture (Fukouka, 1996; Lambert, 2004). While these cultural atrocities were terrible, they were unfortunately not unique to Korean people. Similar acts of cultural imperialism were endured by African slaves when they were forcibly transported to the American colonies and required to adopt new

names, a new language (Afrolumens Project, 2004), and were forbidden from practicing traditional African religions (Raboteau, 2001).

Additionally, the near starvation, beatings, and rape of Korean ‘comfort women’—those women and girls who were conscripted, tricked, or kidnapped for the sexual use of Japanese soldiers (Park, 1996; Soh, 2001)—shares similar markings of patriarchal abuse endured by African slave women and later by free black women in the U. S. who endured the often unwanted sexual advances and rape committed by white slave owners during slavery, white male landowners during periods of sharecropping, and white male heads of household during periods of black women’s domestic service (Collins, 2000; Copeland, 1993; Dash, 1997; Grant, 1993; Williams, 1993).

Finally, the more than three-quarters of a million Koreans currently living in Japan (largely the survivors and descendents of those conscripted in Japan in 1945) continue to face racism, discrimination, and economic exploitation (Fukuoka, 1996; Park, 1996). It is not difficult to see the commonalities between the oppression faced by these Korean people in Japan and the current economic and social oppression faced by black Americans in the U. S. These shared experiences of cultural assault, patriarchal abuse, racial prejudice, and oppression between Korean and U. S. black people make the Korean concept of Han especially useful for enhancing black theological reflection. Thus, while the articulation of a black theology of liberation based on the concept of Han may seem fantastic, it is believed that such fantasy underscores the break with traditional understandings of sin, God, and salvation necessary for the social transformation this project seeks.

### **Han and the Han Resolution Framework**

Han is a Korean term used to describe the ‘depths of human suffering’ (Park, 1993, p. 15) that produce extreme psychological pain for victims of oppression or wrongdoing. Park describes the concept of Han as follows:

The victims of various types of wrongdoing express the ineffable experience of deep bitterness and helplessness. Such an experience of pain is called Han in the Far East. Han can be defined as the critical wound of the heart generated by unjust psychosomatic repression, as well as by social, political, economic, and cultural oppression. It is entrenched in the hearts of the victims of sin and violence, and is expressed through such diverse reactions as sadness, helplessness, hopelessness, resentment, hatred, and the will to revenge. (1993, p. 10)

Park (a Korean theologian and professor of theology) introduced the concept of Han to western theological discourse in *The Wounded Heart of God: The Asian concept of Han and the Christian Doctrine of Sin* (1993). In this book Park argues that Christianity, centered on the doctrine of sin, offers “salvation” to sinners but does not address the needs of victims of sin. He writes:

It is my view that the guilt of the oppressor is not a matter to be resolved through the unilateral proclamation of forgiveness and absolution by a priest or a pastor, without regard to their victims. Forgiveness must take place in cooperation with victims and must involve offenders’ participation in the dissolution of their victims’ Han-ridden shame. The one-sided forgiveness proclaimed by any authority is not forgiveness, but false comfort. (Park, 1993, p. 84)

Park (2004) reiterates this theme in a later work on Han. He writes:

In Christian theology, sin is the only category we have to diagnose the wrong of the world. We have drawn the map of salvation for sinners and have left those who have been sinned against to find the way themselves. (p. 9)

Park (1993) argues that the salvation offered to sinners through the doctrine of sin is incomplete because it privileges the sinner's vertical relationship with God and excludes from consideration the sinner's horizontal relationship with those he or she sinned against. Salvation is relational; sinners must be reconciled with those they have sinned against before they can be reconciled with God. Likewise, those who have been sinned against must have their deep pain (i.e. Han) resolved through reconciliation with their oppressors before they can be reconciled with God. Unless these two relationships—horizontal human relationships and vertical relationship with God—are both honored, salvation (i.e. repaired human relationships of love and care with other humans and with God) will not be realized (Park, 1993). Discussing this process of salvation, Park (1993) writes:

This dialectical salvation is the relational, dynamic, and affective interaction between sinners and their victims, and the cooperative efforts of the two to dissolve Han and sin. In this salvation scheme, the oppressors dialectically participate in the well-being of the oppressed. Both are interpenetrated in an indivisible dialectical destiny. The oppressors (sinners) cannot be saved unless the oppressed (victims) are saved or made whole and vice versa. In other words, no one is fully saved until all are saved. Salvation is wholeness, and no one can actualize wholeness by him or herself. (p. 101)

While Park is concerned with healing the wounds of Han for oppressed individuals, he acknowledges that victims of sin also commit sin themselves. In fact, he argues that victims of unresolved Han are often caught in perpetual cycles of sin and violence because their hurt causes them to internalize the values and perspectives of their offenders (Park, 2004) and subsequently sin against others. He writes:

When people's deep wounds are not healed, the wounds become vortexes of troubled waters, intertwined with their own instinct of survival and fear. Many victims instinctively synchronize their wavelengths with their offenders. They internalize their perpetrators' images and values and externalize them in treating their own victims. In short, they see the world through their oppressors' eyes. Seeing again through their own eyes begins the process of healing. (Park, 2004, p. 3)

For the victims of sin (even though they are themselves sinners), the actual problem of sin remains insignificant until their own Han is resolved (Park, 1993). Thus, Park argues that sin and Han must be addressed together to sufficiently address the problems of the world (Park, 1993, 2004).

To promote salvation (i.e. right relationships with humanity and God), Park offers his Han resolution framework which includes a detailed analysis of the structure of Han and describes a process for Han resolution that encourages offenders and their victims to be reconciled to each other and to God. A discussion of the structure of Han and key elements of Park's (1993, 2004) Han resolution framework follows.

### **Structure of Han**

Park (1993) identifies the origins of Han in social, political, and economic structures of domination which emanate from the capitalist global economy, patriarchy, and racial and/or cultural discrimination. These structures are further manifested through various socio-economic avenues (i.e. neo-colonialism, militarism, religious exclusivism, racism, sexism, and other hierarchical social and economic structures) to produce environments conducive to personal and collective sin and personal and collective Han (Park, 1993).

Han exists in conscious and unconscious levels and can involve individuals and groups (Park, 1993). Additionally, Han manifests itself in active and passive forms (Park, 1993). At the individual level, Han can manifest itself as through vengefulness, fury, and a will to revenge (active form) or in its passive form as resigned bitterness, self-hatred, and helplessness (Park, 1993). At the collective level, active conscious Han can be understood as a 'collective will to revolt' arising from a group's experiences of oppression and exploitation (Park, 1993, p. 36). In its passive form, Park describes conscious group Han as a despairing ". . . feeling which resides within victims who have been oppressed for a long period without any hope" (1993, p. 37). As an example of passive conscious group Han, Park offers Jewish survivors of the Holocaust who despaired because they were not only angry at Nazi inhumanity, but also at God for allowing it.

Park (1993) suggests that unconscious group Han can be transmitted to other generations through culture or ethnic ethos. Active unconscious Han manifests itself in racial resentment while passive unconscious Han manifests itself in racial lamentations epitomized by Negro spirituals and African American Blues music (Park, 1993). In addition to individual and group Han, Park (1993) also identifies a Han of nature which results from humanity's abusive treatment of the ecological system. Park (2004) summarizes the structures of Han in the following passage:

Han exists on two levels: individual and collective. At its individual level, it is the will to revenge, resignation, regret, diffuseness, absence, bitterness, and helplessness, reacting to a private oppression that can also often be connected to collective and structural oppression. At its collective level, Han is the corporate will to revolt, collective despair, communal wrath, group discontent, racial

treatment, and racial lamentation. The collective dimension of Han includes its structural level that involves chronic and systemic exploitation and injustice. (Park, 2004, p. 15)

The concept of Han is complicated by the reality of complex human relationships. A victim of Han in one context may be an oppressor in another context. For example, an African American male may experience Han from racial discrimination but also may cause women to experience Han through his exercise of patriarchal privilege. Whatever the context of Han (i.e. individual or group, active or passive, conscious or unconscious), individuals are motivated to resolve Han; it can be resolved negatively (by punishing or killing the offender) or positively (through love and care) or can be transmitted to future generations (Park, 1993, 2004).

For Park (2004), successful resolution of Han (i.e. resolution through love and care) involves reconciliation between the wrongdoer and the wronged such that the wrongdoer reorients him/herself and is forgiven by the wronged person. Describing the benefits of Han resolution through love and care for the oppressor (as opposed to negative Han resolution), Park writes:

It is a different matter to confront the oppressor with justice and care. Only the love that humanizes our enemy enables us to deal with him or her again. By turning the other cheek we demand justice and equality from our oppressor and enter into an ongoing relationship with him or her. Only when we care enough for the oppressor can we challenge him or her to change. This care for the oppressor becomes the essential ingredient in resistance. Without it, resistance would turn into hatred and retaliation, dehumanizing us and failing to change the oppressor. (Park, 2004, 67)

Positive resolution of Han involves four steps: awakening, understanding, envisagement, and enactment (Park, 1993). Awakening involves the wronged person's realization of his or her own suffering. Once Han is acknowledged, it must be understood rationally, intuitively, and incarnationally. Rational understanding of Han occurs at the conscious level while intuitive understanding occurs subconsciously; in both instances, understanding involves knowledge of the reality of one's own Han in relation to the 'spectrum of Han-producing situations' in the world (Park, 1993).

Incarnational understanding involves the embodiment of rational and intuitive understandings of Han into mindful, daily life practices (Park, 1993). From a phenomenological viewpoint, each level of understanding manifests itself through compassion and empathy—shared pain with others inflicted with Han. The next step in positive Han resolution, envisagement, is hope that involves imagining ways of being in the world that are not defined by hierarchy, domination, and oppression. The final process of Han resolution involves engaging the wrongdoer in compassionate confrontation; for Park, this step is empowering because it allows the oppressed person agency in “. . . dismantling Han-causing elements in the world” (Park, 1993, p. 171). This compassionate confrontation calls oppressors to repentance; if they are willing to reorient themselves away from hierarchy, domination, and oppression, reconciliation can take place.



### **Key Elements of Park's Han Resolution Framework**

Park's (1993, 2004) Han resolution framework offers novel insights on conceptualizations of original sin, salvation, and God. These conceptualizations will now be addressed.

#### ***Original Sin***

Park rejects the notion of original sin—the tainted nature of humanity resulting from the biblical fall of Adam (Park, 1993). Sin is for Park a willful act which destroys harmonious relationships; that the doctrine of original sin holds humanity responsible for sins they did not commit is, according to Park, illogical (Park, 1993). Moreover, the notion of original sin blurs distinctions between sinners and those they have sinned against by presupposing the equally sinful nature of both (Park, 1993). The result is a theology that provides little theological analysis towards alleviating the deep suffering of the oppressed (Park, 1993). Writes Park: “The equality of original sin is good news for the wrongdoer, but bad news for the wronged” (1993, p. 80).

Rather than a belief in original sin, Park (1993) endorses a belief in original Han. While rejecting the notion that sin can be transmitted intergenerationally, Park suggests that the structure of Han can be transmitted biologically, mentally (i.e. consciously), spiritually (i.e. unconsciously), and socially. Biologically, children may inherit Han resulting from the sinful nature of their parents or they may receive the emotional woundedness of their parents through mental or spiritual levels (Park, 1993). Finally, Han can be transmitted socially because children inherit the social environments (e.g. violent life-styles, ethnic conflict, and hierarchical human relationships) of their parents (Park,

1993). While sin incurs guilt and requires repentance, Han brings forth shame and requires reconciliation (Park, 1993). Only by treating the concepts of sin and Han jointly, can salvation be realized (Park, 1993, 2004).

### *Salvation*

Park makes it clear that salvation is not a personal state to be achieved, but a dialectical, relational experience. He writes:

Salvation is not something we can put into our pocket as a possession. Nor does salvation mean securing a ticket to paradise or heaven. Salvation is the restoration of a loving relationship with God and neighbors. It is not a place or a possession, but rather a relationship...Salvation brings about true fellowships with God and others. (Park, 2004, p. 120)

The implications of this conceptualization of salvation are significant. Salvation is not realized through repentance of sin unless that repentance is connected to a ‘profound interior change’ (Park, 1993, p. 90) which impels the sinner to gain forgiveness from his or her victim by rectifying sins through a developed ‘orthopraxis’ (Park, 1993, p. 89) for social justice—the righting of impaired inter-personal and institutional relationships (Park, 1993).

Such an understanding of salvation means that salvation is not guaranteed. This conceptualization encourages human agency for change; rather than relying on individualized notions of salvation that allow one to withdraw from the problems of the world by concentrating exclusively on personal relationships with God. Park’s (1993, 2004) conceptualization holds that one’s relationship with God remains impaired until all human relationships are restored. Thus mutuality is encouraged as opposed to

individualism; if salvation is to be achieved it must come from human efforts and not from God.

### *God*

Arguably, the most controversial element of Park's reconciliation framework is his presentation of a wounded God. Rather than being all-powerful and capable of bringing about salvation at any time, Park's God is wounded like the oppressed. All powerful in the ability to love humanity, God is nevertheless limited in ability to bring about harmonious human relationships (Park, 1993). While God "... seeks to bring good out of all situations" (Park, 2004, p. 143), human freedom—to either reject or embrace God's will—limits God's ability to act. Referring to the ways in which humans can limit God's actions, Park writes:

I believe that our response can either fulfill or foil God's purpose. If we exalt God's will, God's power is free to act upon us. Yet by rejecting God's will in favor of our own desires, our refusal to trust in effect limits the divine will. Although there is no guarantee that the intentional will of God will be realized at the end, God's ultimate will is to make the most of tragic events for our own good. . . . God's mightiness, however, has been misunderstood for ages. It is not the arbitrary or one-sided power with which God is able to do anything God wants. Rather, it is the strength with which God cares for us and actualizes our potential. God is all powerful, not in controlling or forcing us, but in caring for and loving us. (2004, p. 143)

Because salvation as defined by both vertical and horizontal relationships is dialectical (i.e. involving reconciliation between both oppressor and oppressed and between God), Park reasons that not only is God incapable of saving humanity apart from human efforts, but God-self also needs saving. Sin destroys human relationships and also wounds God (Park, 1993). God suffers because "... God's love for humanity is too

ardent to be apathetic toward suffering humanity. No power in the universe can make God vulnerable, but a victim's suffering breaks the heart of God" (Park, 1993, p. 121). Park argues that God's love for humanity is expressed most saliently in God's suffering on the cross through Jesus Christ (Park, 1993). The cross is representative of God's full participation in the suffering of the oppressed (Park, 1993). Because God's suffering is due to impaired human relationships, God's suffering will not end until human relationships are repaired. Thus, God requires human agency for God's salvation; stated another way, God needs saving. Park (1993) writes:

God's agape toward both the Han-ridden and the sinners will not be fulfilled without their healing and return. In other words, God cannot save Godself apart from the salvation of humanity. God needs human beings if God's salvific history initiated with creation is to be fulfilled. (p. 123)

### **The Relationship between "Love" and Ontological Suffering**

Having discussed novel conceptualizations presented in Park's Han resolution framework (i.e. understandings of original sin, salvation, and God), this chapter shifts to a discussion of Park's conceptualization of love. Rather than a novel application of this concept, however, Park's (1993, 1996) presentation of love bears traces of the meta-narrative of ontological suffering. A discussion of Park's "love" and its implications for the present project follows.

#### ***Love***

Park argues that the basis of Han resolution (and consequently salvation) is love, expressed through compassionate, caring relationships. For Park, efforts at salvation cannot authentically be undertaken out of the need to be saved or out of moral obligation.

Salvific works are only authentic if they are undertaken out of care and regard for the well-being of others. He writes:

Relationships derived solely from moral obligation can be exhausting; but relationships which arise from the genuine heart of care are a true blessing for the people involved. All the relationships we develop without genuine love are stressful and extinguishable. Teleo-deontological relationships may yield the moral satisfaction of fulfillment, but not salvation. Relationships which result from pure compassion in God's love bring forth salvation. (Park, 1993, p. 108)

Park argues that the model of love for humans is, not surprisingly, God. God's suffering—exemplified through Christ's crucifixion—demonstrates the profound love of God for humanity. Writes Park (1993), “The cross is God's unshakable love for God's own creation” (p. 123). The love of God for all humanity is manifested in God's suffering on the cross—*with* the sinned against and *because of* sinners (Park, 1993). Thus, God's vulnerable love (i.e. God's suffering love) becomes the model Park offers for humanity to emulate in the process of social transformation.

Significantly, those most capable of emulating God's suffering love and initiating social and ecological transformation are the wounded, the oppressed, and the sinned against. These ‘wounded healers’ (Park, 1996), by virtue of their Han, possess the appropriate experiences necessary to recognize and heal the Han of others. Referring to the vocation of these wounded healers, Park (1996) writes, “Only the deeply wounded can see and understand the inmost wound of a sufferer. In this sense, the marginalized can be the healers of the wounded of our society” (p. 136). In addition to healing the wounded, the wounded healer also must, ultimately heal him or herself because the

offender (who is imprisoned by her or his oppression) cannot free him or herself.

Referring to the need for the wounded to heal themselves, Park writes:

In a true sense, the offended himself or herself can heal his or her own wound. The offender can only help the healing of the wound by participating in the process through his or her own *metanoia* (emphasis author's). Jesus the betrayed sought Peter the betrayer to forgive his sin and transform him. The offender is locked in and only the offended can open the door. The offender dehumanizes himself or herself in the act of dehumanizing others to such a degree that his or her distorted existence cannot make others' wounds whole. (Park, 1993, p. 147)

Significantly, Park's framework, designed to shed light on the overlooked plight of the oppressed, presents the oppressed as responsible for healing themselves and others who are wounded. In the process, the oppressed also heal their oppressors. Although the oppressed must repent of their sins and work to eradicate the Han-filled structures they created (Park, 1993, 2004), they are unable to initiate this process as a consequence of their sinfulness (Park, 1993). Instead, the wounded must do salvific work for their oppressors by initiating reconciliation. Placing the onus to initiate salvation squarely on the shoulders of the oppressed, Park writes:

But victims must initiate this process of true reconciliation, since the oppressors hardly come to repentance by themselves, as their own wrongs prevent them from seeing reality. Oppressors are often locked in a room where the door has no knob. Their prison is self-centeredness. Many do not even know that they are imprisoned . . . The oppressed can see their oppressors better from outside, knowing where the door is and how they can come out. The oppressed can help them see their own blindness and the effect of their own wrongs. Without the assistance of victims, perpetrators would not see the pain caused by their evil work. Only victims can open the offenders' eyes to see what they have done. Victims are thus able to help offenders convert from their own iniquity. (1993, p. 172)

Victims help sinners to repent through compassionate confrontation which involves the 'preparatory toil' (Park, 1993, p. 174) of letting go of one's bitterness over oppression and forgiving one's oppressor (Park, 1996) in order to help the oppressor's conversion. Park (1993) recognizes that the oppressor, when confronted compassionately, may not repent. In such cases, he argues that the oppressed can help resolve their own Han through acts of compassionate confrontation (regardless of outcome) and through orthopraxis to rectify impaired human and institutional relationships. However, such efforts will never result in the complete dissolution of Han because such requires true reconciliation between oppressors and oppressed.

Park's model bears a striking resemblance to Paulo Freire's <sup>33</sup> (1970, 2001) argument that the oppressed bear responsibility for liberating themselves and their oppressors.<sup>34</sup> For Freire (1970, 2001), love (defined as commitment to others), necessitates that the oppressed return the suffering inflicted by their oppressors with care and restoration of their humanity. Freire writes:

This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well. The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves. Only power that springs from the weakness of the oppressed will be sufficiently strong to free both. (1970, 2001, p. 44)

Freire goes on to state:

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<sup>33</sup> Freire's work is cited here to underscore the far-reaching consequences of the ontological suffering paradigm and the embedded nature of this paradigm in the fields of both theology and education.

<sup>34</sup> This similarity is not unintentional; Park (1993) cites Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in his book.

Although the situation of oppression is a dehumanized and dehumanizing totality affecting both the oppressors and those they oppress, it is the latter who must, from their stifled humanity, wage for both the struggle for a fuller humanity; the oppressor, who is himself dehumanized because he dehumanizes others, is unable to lead this struggle. (1970, 2001, p. 47)

Even though the wounded suffer from a deep ‘rupture of the soul’ (Park, 2004) and experience a stifled humanity of rape, exploitation, and oppression (Freire, 1970, 2001), they must nevertheless emerge from these traumas and initiate the process of healing the world. Thus both Park (1993) and Freire (1970, 2001) offer conceptualizations that bears traces of the ontological suffering meta-narrative this project is attempting to dismantle. The ontological suffering meta-narrative suggests that those who suffer bear responsibility for saving the world because oppressors—so weakened from the power of their oppression—cannot do so. Whether carrying out the ontological project of humanization (Freire, 1970, 2001) or the Christ-like project of saving the world, the wounded, oppressed, and the sinned against, must practice a love strong enough to heal and right relationships of the world. No attention is given to whether or not the oppressed *want* to be saviors of the world. By virtue of their oppressed condition, they have no choice. If the oppressed do not initiate the process of humanization/salvation it won’t be realized (Freire, 1970, 2001; Park, 1993) because oppressors’ “. . . distorted existence cannot make others’ wounds whole” (Park, 1993, p. 147). Only the wounded can heal the world; it is their ontological purpose for being. Through their salvific suffering, the oppressed become agents of God (Brock & Parker, 2001), working to bring about salvation through acts of love and compassionate caring (Park, 1993, 2004).



Like God's Han-filled demonstration of sacrificial love for humanity, the oppressed are encouraged to demonstrate loving commitment to others by sacrificing themselves (i.e. forgoing their need for self-care and internal healing). The oppressed must ignore their own need for love and care and concentrate instead on the well-being of their oppressors in order to save (Park, 1993) or humanize (Freire, 1970, 2001) the world. The reward for this type of loving, compassionate commitment to the world is the possibility of salvation, but the price for the oppressed is sacrificing themselves.

Physical, emotional, and spiritual wounds need to be healed, not exalted. The oppressed are in need of love and care; they should not be required to put the needs of the world above their own needs. The oppressed do not bear the burden of healing, humanizing, or saving the world without the assistance of other human beings who participate daily in the economic and social destruction of the world. While those who are economically, socially, politically, or sexually oppressed could *participate* in helping others in pain *after* they have begun their own healing,<sup>35</sup> to encourage oppressed individuals to heal their oppressors is simply irresponsible theology. It is greatly overstating the point to suggest (as do Freire, 1970, 2001 and Park, 1993, 2004) that the oppressed lack the ability or the awareness to stop engaging in acts of oppression without the assistance of the oppressed. Certainly, it is difficult work to acknowledge one's culpability in the exploitation and/or mistreatment of another human being—but it is work that oppressors are *capable* of carrying out.

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<sup>35</sup> Park (1993, 2004) suggests that oppressed people can dissolve their Han by helping other wounded individuals.

Park (2004) acknowledges rare instances when sinners, racked by guilt come to repentance. While these instances may not lead to equitable human relationships,<sup>36</sup> they at least demonstrate a cognizance of wrongdoing that Park and Freire suggest oppressors lack the ability to perceive. There are other examples of oppressors coming to the realization of their wrongdoing. Perhaps the most salient examples are to be found among slaveholders who acknowledged the wrongness of their participation in chattel slavery.

While the social context of the southern slaveholding society consisted of powerful norms to be successful, economic prosperity was at odds with the tenets of evangelical Protestantism to which most slaveholders subscribed (Oakes, 1982). To reconcile this dilemma, Oakes (1982) argues that many slaveholders, especially those migrating west, limited themselves to sub-standard living conditions and invested their profits from slave ownership into purchasing more slaves (Oakes, 1982). Yet for all of their privation, slave owners were still bothered by the inherent contradictions between Christianity and slave ownership. Oakes (1998) cites a minister who owned slaves as follows:

It is exceedingly difficult to use them as money, to treat them as property, and at the same time render to them that which is just and equal as immortal and accountable beings, and as heirs of the grace of life, equally with ourselves.<sup>37</sup>  
(Oakes, 1982, p. 104)

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<sup>36</sup> Brock and Parker (2001) argue that guilt is inappropriate for building equitable relationships because it inverts the relationship between oppressor and oppressed by holding the sin over the head of the oppressor. In such a relationship, the oppressed and the oppressor are bonded by the oppressor's guilt, not love.

<sup>37</sup> Sarah McCulloh Lemmon, ed., *The Pettigrew Papers* (Raleigh, NC, 1971)

Some slave owners found it impossible to reconcile their vocations with their religion and freed their slaves. An example of this comes from Freeborn Garretson, a Maryland slave holder. After a religious conversion Garretson writes:

As I stood with a book in my hand, in the act of giving out a hymn, this thought powerfully struck my mind, 'It is not right for you to keep your fellow-creatures in bondage; you must let the oppressed go free.'<sup>38</sup> (Oakes, 1982, p. 106)

Slaveholders who persisted in keeping their slaves, even though they knew it to be morally wrong, were plagued by the belief that they would face eternal damnation for their crimes against humanity (Oakes, 1982). Describing this phenomenon, Oakes writes: "The pervasive inner turmoil among the slaveholders is revealed in their startlingly frequent declarations that when they died they would go to hell" (Oakes, 1982, p. 114). According to Oakes, such declarations could not be attributed to generalized evangelical beliefs about the spiritual unworthiness of all humanity; while slaveholders were convinced of their own damnation, they were equally convinced that their slaves would go to heaven when they died (Oakes, 1982). From these confessional writings, it is clear that slaveholders were quite capable of discerning the wrongness of their actions; those who did not free their slaves made conscious choices to place earthly profits over what they believed to be otherworldly salvation (Oakes, 1982).

Yet another example of a slaveholder's consciousness of wrong actions is found in Frederick Douglass' "A Meeting with His Former Master" (1984). Upon returning to Maryland, Douglass is invited to the bedside of his former master, now more than 80

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<sup>38</sup> Kenneth L. Carrol, "Religious Influences on the Manumission of Slaves in Caroline, Dorchester, and Talbot Counties," *Md. Hist. Mag.*, LVI (1961), 188.

years old and dying. Describing the treatment he received from Captain Thomas Auld,

Douglass writes:

He had struck down my personality, had subjected me to his will, made property of my body and soul, reduced me to chattel, hired me out to a noted slave breaker to be worked like a beast and flogged into submission, taken my hard earnings, sent me to prison, offered me for sale, broken up my Sunday-school, forbidden me to teach my fellow-slaves to read on pain of nine and thirty lashes on my bare back and had, without any apparent disturbance of his conscience, sold my body to his brother Hugh and pocketed the price of my flesh and blood. (Douglass, 1984, pp. 215-216)

Yet despite these brutalities, Auld, when asked by Douglass what he thought of

Douglass' escape North states: "Frederick, I always knew you were too smart to be a

slave, and had I been in your place, I should have done as you did" (Douglass, 1984, p.

218). Auld's words (as well as those of other slaveholders cited above) evidence a

consciousness of wrongdoing that belies the claim of oppressors' blindness to their

misdeeds. These individuals were not oblivious to their sins or incapable of altering their

actions; no amount of cleverly worded mental gymnastics can disguise the fact that they

were more concerned with profit margins than black lives. Philosophies and theologies

that present oppressors as 'weakened by their power' do great harm by enabling the

oppressors to remain as such through an implicit endorsement of the status quo.

Admittedly, these are only a few examples. It is not surprising, thought, that there are so few examples of the oppressed taking responsibility for their own sins.

Indubitably, the persistence of the ontological suffering paradigm prevents the surfacing of many alternative conceptualizations of oppression and liberation. Yet some do exist

and these should serve as the building blocks for conscious efforts of a new paradigm built on mutual responsibility.

While many oppressors do not confess their wrongdoing without provocation, it is a mistake to interpret their lack of responsibility as inability. It is a further error to mistake the survival strategies of oppressed individuals for inherent salvific traits<sup>39</sup> capable of saving oppressors. The perceptive abilities Park (1993) proposes that the oppressed have due to their woundedness is not a genetic trait, but a sensitivity of to the plight of others, cultivated through oppressive circumstances (Collins, 2000). Similarly, the callousness of many oppressors to the suffering of others is learned, not biological. If oppressors are in a prison of their own self-awareness it is because their life circumstances have not largely been dependent on remaining aware of the situations, circumstances, and emotional needs of others (Collins, 2000). Said differently, oppressors can afford to be ignorant of the oppressed; the oppressed must, for their survival, be knowledgeable of their oppressors (Lorde, 1984). These are learned behaviors, not ontological pre-dispositions. The solution to learned callousness is education. Park's model does not seek to educate oppressors in any substantive way; it relieves them of responsibility for their own actions and overburdens the oppressed to (continue to) be the pack mules of humanity (Collins, 2000). An awareness of and/or sensitivity to the needs of others does not make oppressed individuals exceptionally capable of saving the world. It only makes them convenient targets for irresponsible theology.

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<sup>39</sup> See for example King (1967), Cone (1975), Copeland (1993), and Grant (1993).

### **Concluding Thoughts on the Han Resolution Framework**

Ultimately, Park's theology, rather than helping to heal the woundedness of victims, serves the needs of oppressors by helping them to avoid responsibility for saving themselves and for doing the difficult work of repairing human relationships. The work of saving the world can not be born by a group of exploited and vulnerable people alone. The responsibility of salvation is shared by all of humanity—oppressors and the oppressed. Rather than initiating world salvation, the oppressed need to be healed before they can even join the struggle to transform the world.

Relevant to black theological discourse, Park's (1993, 1996) model of vulnerable love is especially harmful. By modeling his understanding of love after the sacrifices of Jesus Christ, Park literally encourages the oppressed to be Christ-like in their compassion and caring. Yet Park describes the life of Jesus as one of Han-filled suffering (1993, 2004).

Not only did the cross express the Han of God; so also did the thirty-three years of Jesus' living. We have concentrated on the cross of Christ as God's suffering. But we have neglected the suffering aspect of Jesus' life . . . He was acquainted with the deep Han of human beings . . . Jesus' suffering for three hours on the cross was one thing; his many years' suffering with smothering religious stipulations was another. The latter was a profound source of Jesus' Han. Compared with at least three years' suffering from humiliation, mockery, false accusation, religious inquisition, the three hours' suffering was rather light. (Park, 1993, p. 125)

The Han of Jesus, an innocent who suffered for the world, was so great that he had difficulty bearing it. Referring again to the Han of Jesus, Park writes "His death was not a natural one, but a Han-filled one that found voice in his outcry, 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?'" (2004, p. 117). Oppressed black Americans are not Jesus

Christ and should not be encouraged to bear their Han-fullness as Jesus did. Black Americans are not Christ-surrogates. To place such unrealistic expectations on a group of oppressed individuals is irresponsible because it implies that suffering is noble and virtuous. By presenting sacrificial suffering as a way to be like Jesus, Park, albeit unintentionally, suggests that suffering is holy and sacred.

Black women in particular have internalized the message of sacred, Christ-like suffering (Weems, 2004; Williams, 1993) to their peril. After the wounded have healed the world, how will their own wounds be healed? Brock and Parker (2001) pose this intriguing question in the following passage.

Theologians may say that the suffering of victims helps heal the world, but who will heal the suffering victims? Who will take the crucified down from the cross and grieve? How will their lives be restored or redeemed, their bitter anguish salved? (p. 42)

Health statistics for black Americans suggest that they are indeed in need of salve for their woundedness. Black women have the highest mortality rates of any race/ethnic group for almost every major cause of death (Womancando.org, 2002) What this suggests is that suffering, rather than being salvific, is deleterious. Black Americans are already brutalized by poor health, low educational attainment, etc. Must they also be brutalized by their religion? If God is, as liberation theologians suggest, partial to the oppressed,<sup>40</sup> why would God desire oppressed black Americans to suffer the Han of Jesus? Yet such desire—in this case divine disfavor—can be extrapolated from Park's (1993, 2004)

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<sup>40</sup> Although this project does not endorse the view of divine partiality see Gustavo Gutierrez (1988) for an example of this argument.

model. His model does not suggest divine partiality for the oppressed but rather when applied to black Americans, suggests the divine racism of God.<sup>41</sup> Park ultimately relies on the ontological suffering paradigm even though he is acutely aware of the pain of victims of sin and the inherent wrongness of ignoring their plight. Rather than an indictment of his work, this fact reveals the pervasiveness of oppressive meta-narratives and the difficulty of even those most concerned with the suffering of victims to transcend those paradigms.

### **Fragments of Han**

While Park's adherence to the ontological suffering meta-narrative is unfortunate, it does not prevent the adoption of the concept of Han for this re-articulation of black theological discourse. Neither does it diminish the usefulness of several of his other insights for this project. Here David Tracy's (1999) conceptualization of black theological fragments can be expanded to Park's model as well. Using the concept of Han as a foundation, this new black theological vision begins with the recognition that all survivors of radical suffering are in need of Han resolution. It follows that the meeting of such needs must be of primary importance for reconciliation/liberation efforts. Additionally, Park's rejection of the notion of original sin also is adopted. As is Park's (1993, 2004) recognition that sin involves impaired human and institutional relationships and salvation. Rather than being simply and interior process, salvation involves participation in the destruction of Han-producing structures in the world. Finally, also adopted is Park's conceptualization of God as wounded and in need of salvation.

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<sup>41</sup> See the argument set forth in William Jones' (1973). *Is God a White Racist: A Preamble to Black Theology*.



### **Towards Transcendence**

It is somewhat discouraging that the theme of ontological suffering of the oppressed (whether expressed in its generic form here or specifically as the suffering of black bodies in various black theological discourses) persists in black theology, liberation theology, and education. Why must efforts at reconciliation, healing, wholeness, and social justice persistently begin with the understanding that the oppressed are the only ones capable of initiating social transformation? Why must such initiation continuously be framed in terms of the love and sacrifice of the oppressed? The question posed in chapter three bears repeating here: what better method of maintaining the status quo and avoiding social transformation could there be than to place the onus of responsibility for world transformation and world salvation on those who are most vulnerable and oppressed? Clearly, an alternative to this paradigm is needed.

Having rejected Park's meta-narrative of ontological suffering of the oppressed, what models are available to provide an alternative understanding of love and human relationships? While no codified theology was found which offers such a conceptualization, the initial ideas are presented in Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker's (2001) *Proverbs for Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for what Saves Us*.

#### **Brock and Parker (2001): *Proverbs for Ashes***

Like Park (1993, 1996, 2004), Brock and Parker (2001) expand conceptualizations of salvation to include forgiveness for sinners, but also healing for victims. Their theology is based on earlier work by Brock (1988) on sin and salvation.

For Brock (1988), sinfulness is not a genetic mark of humanity but a consequence of impaired human relationships—a sign of our own damage and the damage that we do to others. In this sense, Brock’s (1988) ‘brokenheartedness’ (i.e. damage resulting from impaired relationships) is very similar to Park’s (1993) concept of woundedness. In both cases, brokenheartedness or woundedness need to be healed not punished.

Brock and Parker (2001) build on Brock’s (1988) conceptualization of human relationships to problematize the presumed redemptive nature of suffering and sacrifice. Brock and Parker differ from Park in their understanding of the relationship between love, sacrifice, and salvation. They are critical of theologies which present Christian sacrifice as a positive connotation. In the following quote Brock and Parker (2001) explicate the problematics of theologies conflating the Christian principles of love and sacrifice. They write:

. . . when theology presents Jesus’ death as God’s sacrifice of his beloved child for the sake of the world, it teaches that the highest love is sacrifice. To make sacrifice or to be sacrificed is virtuous and redemptive. (p. 25)

Such conflation is for Brock and Parker tantamount to encouraging Christians to be passive to abuse. They continue their explanation in the following passage:

Jesus is presented as the obedient son, accepting violence because his father wills it. The salvation offered by Jesus is gained by his sacrifice of himself to abuse. In other words, he accepts violence for the sake of his love for perpetrators of violence, whether it is God or sinful humanity. Defining love and relationship as obedience and sacrifice structures them in terms of power and abuse . . . But why would a loving being use violence to draw humanity closer to himself? Abuse creates intense emotional bonds, but they are the bonds of violated boundaries, of broken hearts. Why did God require a brutal sacrifice before he could love imperfect beings as themselves? (Brock & Parker, 2001, p. 157)

Arguing that neither Jesus' death on the cross nor the sacrifice of the wounded are salvific, the authors seek to articulate ways of being in human relationship that do not endorse suffering and sacrifice. At the center of their theology are the concepts of presence and love. These concepts will now be discussed.

### **Presence**

For Brock and Parker (2001), presence, defined as “. . . a power which guards, judges, and continually recreates” (p. 9), is a manifestation of God. Presence is a life-giving force that provides all humanity with access to God. As a result of human broken-heartedness (i.e. sinfulness) awareness of presence may be lost. For Brock and Parker (2001), this loss is a result of some type of violence (e.g. racism, sexism, hate crimes, homophobia, intimate violence, political torture, economic exploitation, etc.) that violates appropriate boundaries in human relational bonds. Violence harms both the sinner and his or her victim by denying both access to presence. According to Brock and Parker, acts of violence

. . . diminish the presence of spirit by wrapping oppressor and oppressed, perpetrator and victim, together in emotional chains that force the air out of the space between them. These claustrophobic emotional chains of abuse and oppression can be mistaken for love because their emotional power to bond is fierce. But such chains suffocate the spirit, two selves are fused into one, either of which can give itself up to the other. Neither will notice the spirit is missing. Selflessness becomes the model for love when the spirit is absent. (2001, p. 157)

Like Park's (1993, 2004) understanding of Han, the above passage from Brock and Parker recognizes the harm done to both the sinned against and the sinner when impaired human relationships exist. Brock and Parker also join Park in recognizing the

devastating effects of woundedness on the sinned against. Describing the effects of loss of presence on the wounded individual, Brock and Parker write:

We can be so violated that we lose the luminosity in ourselves, our aliveness scattered to coals and ashes, fragments of broken fire. We can live in the muddy ashes of a life without presence, dissolve into the critical acids of self-hatred, or burrow deep into the confines of that which can rationally control. Without some glow in the night, life fades, presence is diminished. (Brock & Parker, 2001, p. 213)

Denied presence must be restored to the brokenhearted in order for them to have a chance at thriving. Such healing requires the victim to speak the truth of her or his violation and have that truth affirmed. The victim must then be allowed to grieve. The painfulness of this process necessitates that it only be undertaken in the midst of a caring community of individuals that embody presence, “. . . reverence the sacred presence of [other] human beings and . . . protect life by taking actions that keep faith with their knowledge of something other than lessons of oppression, or abuse, or violence” (Brock & Parker, 2001, p. 110). In order for those oppressed by violence to speak the truth of their reality, they must remember their violation. Phenomenologically, this remembrance is a re-living of violations; Brock and Parker describe such remembrance as a terrifying experience. They write:

. . . remembering violence requires a descent into hell. The terrifying feelings return, as if the flesh is torn again. Remembering requires reliving what happened before it can be retrieved and put into words. After the descent, the telling of truth about violence and abuse is possible when friends or other steady witnesses listen patiently until the story is told. The telling begins the recovery, the work of the spirit to save. (Brock & Parker, 2001, p. 146)

The psychological response to such an ordeal is grief over the magnitude of one's violation and the effects of loss of presence in one's life. If one is able to recover from violence, the knowledge gained impels the restored person to work for social transformation. Brock and Parker (2001) describe the process by which restored persons come to work for social justice in the following passage.

Restored, people return to ordinary life and expand their concern to others—not as self-sacrifice but as self-possession. Present to themselves and to the reality of others, they do not live in denial of violence but in remembrance of presence. They have embraced a greater knowledge of the world, of evil. When we come into such presence of ourselves we are able to take responsibility for our actions and lives, in all their ambiguity. And in that process of taking responsibility, we turn the corner toward the practice of loving, the practice of transforming the world. (p. 100)

Although there is no guarantee that the broken hearted will ever be fully restored, caring communities provide the best chance for the sinned against to be healed. Though Brock and Parker (2001) ultimately arrive at the conclusion of Park (1993, 2004)—that salvation begins when the sinned against work to transform the world—their theologies differ significantly. Brock and Parker's rejection of the benefits of suffering as sacrifice necessitates that their theology relieve from the wounded, the oppressed, and the brokenhearted, the onus of responsibility for repairing violated human relationships. The difference between Brock and Parker's (2001) and Park's (1993, 2004) understanding of the role of the wounded in social transformation arises out of their different usage of the concept of love.

## Love

Brock and Parker describe two types of love—selfless and erotic. Eros is exemplified by “. . . reciprocity in love, the yearning to be in another’s presence, in the fullness of spirit, manifest in the power of love” (Brock & Parker, 2001, p. 158). While Brock and Parker view eros as life-giving, they conceptualize selfless love—the product of violated human relationships—as life-taking. Brock and Parker (2001) argue that when encouraged, selfless love (applied in the interest of healing wounded relationships) only serves to create more victimization because it strengthens the empathetic union between sinner and the sinned against. The sacrificial love of God for humanity epitomizes such an empathetic union; the atonement theory holds that the love of God for the world was so great that God sacrificed Godself (i.e. through Jesus Christ, the human embodiment of God) to save the world (Brock & Parker, 2001).

To present a theology that requires the oppressed to understand the woundedness of their oppressors and to love their oppressors despite the oppressor’s sins is akin to asking the oppressed to take on the empathetic union God (through Jesus Christ) demonstrated for the sake of sinful humanity. Yet this is exactly what ‘compassionate confrontation’ (Park, 1993, 2004) asks of the oppressed. In order to carry out this type of love, the oppressed must shed themselves of their inner wounds—the part of themselves that was sinned against—without having healed those wounds.<sup>42</sup> Such actions implicitly suggest that the wounds of the oppressed are insignificant and by implication, so are the

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<sup>42</sup> Park (1993, 2004) argues that woundedness (i.e. Han) can be dissolved through the process of compassionate confrontation of the oppressor; such an understanding of healing is, however, not endorsed in the present project.

oppressed—except as agents of the oppressor’s salvation (Brock & Parker, 2001). Such a theology makes the oppressors more important than the oppressed because the oppressed are asked to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the oppressor; no such compunctions are placed on the oppressors. For Brock and Parker, when empathetic union is understood in this way it further victimizes the oppressed by obligating them to carry out the emotional work of their oppressors. Brock and Parker write:

Empathetic connection to another is not necessarily life-giving or life-saving. The empathetic bond can hold a human being captive to another’s unjust demand. Our ability to feel for another can become an unholy bond in which the other’s obligation to feel for himself, or feel for herself, is ignored. (2001, p. 197)

The ‘unholy bond’ of oppression is strengthened when the oppressed are encouraged engage in compassionate confrontation with their oppressors because the responsibility of oppressors to feel for themselves is not acknowledged.

In contrast to selfless love, Brock and Parker describe compassion inspired by eros as life-saving. Because eros is concerned with the flesh, it encourages taking care of the body instead of inflicting it with suffering (Brock & Parker, 2001). When restored people honor presence in their lives, they become guided by spirit which allows discernment of positive compassion (i.e. that which is used to heal) and negative compassion (i.e. that which destroys presence and suffocates life). Such discernment promotes social transformation (Brock & Parker, 2001). Discussing the work of ‘spirit’ Brock and Parker write:

The spirit, the breathing space of love, allows us to discern when we have been violated, when our love for another has reached the limits of our ability to endure

pain, when we cannot remain present . . . Love engages the self and its passions, instead of suppressing the self. (2001, p. 158)

Erotic love impels restored individuals towards reciprocal union and does the work of healing. Such love is embodied by caring communities of restored people—not wounded individuals. Restored people, through daily acts of erotic love, counter violence by “. . . introducing in the flesh the truth that violence denies” (Brock & Parker, 2001, p. 110). Such embodied love requires the presence of healthy bodies, not the dissolution of wounded ones. Brock and Parker write:

Love is most fully incarnate when human beings are present in many dimensions of themselves—physically, spiritually, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually present. Physical love is an important dimension of eros, a life-sustaining power that finds expression in many relationships. . . . The more present human beings can be to each other, as the fullest selves they can be, the more complete the love. (p. 158)

Thus the wounded and oppressed must be healed<sup>43</sup> before they can participate in the work of changing the world. Such healing differs from that proposed by Park (1993, 2004) because it does not require relationship with one’s oppressor.

Brock and Parker make it clear that love—although it may involve pain—does not require sacrifice. They write:

Love is not without pain. Love involves change and to change involves risk. We face the limits of love in the finite circumstances of our lives, the experiences which have nurtured and wounded us. Love requires courage for risk-taking and self-possession, not self-sacrifice. The more we love, the more loss carves into our souls. Pain is the risk of loving, not the basis of love. (p. 158)

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<sup>43</sup> Brock and Parker (2001) make it clear that the trauma of violation may be so great that healing or restoration never occur.



Thus Brock and Parker's theology, although similar to Park's (1993, 2004) theology, differs in its conceptualization of compassion and its understanding of the process through which one undergoes healing and works for social justice.

### **Concluding Thoughts on *Proverbs for Ashes***

Brock and Parker's work is significant because it provides a model which transcends the ontological suffering meta-narrative by dismantling the presumed necessity of relationship between oppressor and oppressed. The wounded, whether they are sinners, sinned against, or (as is most likely) both can be healed through caring communities. The sinned against need not suffer the trauma of re-living their violation in the presence of the oppressor. The oppressor need not be joined to the oppressed out of the paralyzing and counter-productive emotion of guilt. Both oppressor and oppressed can be healed separately in order to sever the violation that bonds them in misery. Both can reconnect with the presence that violence denied them; both can then join the caring communities that salve violated wounds to transform the world (Brock & Parker, 2001). Through an adoption of Brock and Parker's concepts of erotic love, caring communities, and healing, important theological tools are provided for the conceptualization of a re-articulated black theology.

Preceding sections of this chapter have discussed the fragments of black theological discourse, Park's concept of Han, and Brock and Parker's concepts of erotic love, caring communities, and healing that will contribute to a re-articulated vision of black theology. The final section of this chapter will explicate the black theological discourse which results from an amalgamation of these fragments.

## **A Fantastic, Embodied, Emancipatory Discourse for Black Theology**

### *Sin*

Sin consists of impaired human, institutional, and ecological relationships (Brock & Parker, 2001; Park, 1993, 2004). These relational impairments can be based on diverse social categories such as race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, religious preference, political affiliation, sexual orientation, intimate relationship, etc., but they all violate healthy and reciprocal human relational boundaries (Brock & Parker, 2001). Acts of sin may result from greed (e.g. the volitional rupture of relationships for economic, social, or political gain) or failure of awareness (i.e., the sinner fails to anticipate effects of her/his actions on other humans, institutions, or the environment). In either case, sin ultimately results from mis-education. The role of education in repairing relationships will be discussed in chapter five of this project.

The result of sin (i.e. impaired relationships) is Han or deep psychological woundedness on the part of the recipient of the sin (Park, 1993, 2004). The sinner also is Han-filled (Park, 1993, 2004) because she/he has likely been sinned against<sup>44</sup> and further distances her/himself from God by sinning against another. Such woundedness causes both the sinner and the sinned against to lose presence (Brock & Parker, 2001)—an awareness of and perception of deep connection with God and all humanity. Out of woundedness, both sinner and sinned against may repeat the cycle of relational violation,

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<sup>44</sup> Park (1993) emphasizes the recycling nature of Han; sin is both a cause and a consequence of impaired relationships. Thus, those who violate others have likely been violated themselves (the sinner also is the sinned against).

producing even more Han and sin<sup>45</sup> (Park, 1993, 2004). Institutional, relational, and environmental Han interact to produce interlocking structures of domination (i.e., monopoly capitalism, patriarchy, racism, gender oppression, class exploitation, etc.). To stop the cycle of sin and Han, the wounded need Han resolution (Park, 1993, 2004); Han resolution at the individual level consists of individual healing whereas Han resolution at the societal level is consists of social transformation.

### God

The existence of a God that is just and desires repaired human relationships is presupposed. God is a beneficent entity whose presence is always available for all of humanity to receive (Brock & Parker, 2001). God's presence (i.e. grace) can be disclosed through suffering and oppression, but also is available to individuals who are not experiencing radical suffering. This point is significant because it discounts the notion that those who suffer have special access to God or are more able to discern God's will because of their suffering (Brock & Parker, 2001). Though God's presence is available to all that will receive it, human sin blocks awareness of God's presence and limits God's power to save (i.e. repair relationships for) humanity (Brock & Parker, 2001; Park, 1993, 2004). In this sense, the Han of humanity also wounds God (Park, 1993, 2004).

God's woundedness means that regardless of the depths of God's love for humanity, God cannot save humanity (Park, 1993). It is the responsibility of humans, working cooperatively, to repair this world that we have ourselves broken (Brock &

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<sup>45</sup> This definition of sin does not preclude the possibility of evil in the world. Evil, though it may exist, is not susceptible to human power and can therefore only be responded to through prayer (Purpel & McLarin, 2004).

Parker, 2001; McFague, 1982; Purpel & McLaurin, 2004; Park, 1993, 2004). The human onus for earthly salvation is significant; it means that human agency in this world is needed rather than otherworldly preoccupation. While many oppressed black Americans possess a psychological need for the existence of otherworldly salvation—to help in coping with the seemingly unceasing oppression in this world (Hopkins, 1997)—heavenly preoccupation forestalls the human undertaking of salvific action and must therefore be discouraged. It is entirely conceivable that God can transcend human logic (Thurman, 1963/2000) and establish existential salvation in the undisclosed future (West, 1993a), but human beings are suffering now and human beings have the ability and capacity to stop this suffering now. Human action to change the world must be undertaken now, regardless of the possibility of otherworldly salvation. The presentation of God as wounded also, importantly, solves the theodicy dilemma. God is not all powerful—God’s power is limited by human freedom. God cannot therefore stop suffering without the assistance of humanity. Theology need no longer create excuses for God’s failure to end suffering and oppression. God cannot end suffering alone. This endorsement certainly creates fear that no salvation of any kind will ever be realized, but it also creates a strong motivation for human action. If we want salvation, we need to begin the work of healing the world.

The presentation of a wounded God is not an endorsement of secular humanism. Though God’s power is limited through human action, God’s grace is sustaining in the midst of radical suffering. It was God’s grace that allowed enslaved Africans to endure the extreme violation of their humanity and to live through a system of exploitation that

they were never meant to survive (Lorde, 1984). It is God's grace that sustains within oppressed individuals the knowledge that they were created for freedom (Cone, 1975). This chapter, therefore, does not endorse the belief that God is irrelevant or unnecessary for salvation; though God cannot save the world due to human freedom, God's grace is the sustaining force through which humans can be inspired to greater heights of caring and healing work in order to save the world ourselves.

### ***Onus of Responsibility for Change***

It is the responsibility of the world to save the world. This does not translate into "it is everyone's responsibility so it is really no one's responsibility." Every human being living on this Earth has a responsibility to make changes in her or his life and her or his relationships that will heal the world. Those who are presently enduring radical suffering, however, cannot participate in saving the world until they are themselves healed. Healing is required for all who are wounded—oppressors and the oppressed—because, for the wounded, their own wounds have more salience than their sins (Park, 1993, 2004). Those who are sinners are not likely to attend to the wounds of others until receiving balm for their own. Those who are sinned against likely lack the physical, mental, and emotional strength necessary to heal the world because they need restoration. When sinners and the sinned against are restored, they become capable of participating in healing the world for social transformation.

Healing occurs when the wounded (whether or not those persons also are oppressors) are immersed in caring communities where they can tell the truth of their violations, receive affirmation, grieve, and possibly join in the process of salvific social

transformation (Brock & Parker, 2001). The healing of woundedness through caring communities is a sort of re-education because it restores individuals by directing them away from individualism and selfishness towards reciprocity, community, and God's grace. Simply put, caring communities re-educate sinners and the sinned against in love.

### *Love*

Love can be understood as eros—an embodied love that impels individuals toward reciprocity and connection (Baker-Fletcher, 2004; Brock & Parker, 2001; Hopkins, 2004; Pinn, 2004). Because erotic love is embodied love, it does not attempt to separate the mind from the body or the body from the soul. Embodied love occurs in the flesh. It takes seriously the concepts of care and suffering because embodied love experiences these concepts rather than conceptualizing them. Embodied love is painful and risk-taking love (Brock & Parker, 2001) that opens itself up to act on behalf of wounded individuals with the knowledge that such actions are ambiguous and of uncertain outcome (Bauman, 1995). Embodied love understands that suffering is a felt experience of deep pain and anguish (Park, 1993; 2004) that cannot be spiritualized without inflicting more harm on the sufferer. Embodied love is a discernable love that can be given in order to heal or withdrawn in order to preserve the well-being of the giver (Brock & Parker, 2001). This type of wise, complicated, caring, in the flesh love is produced by healed individuals within caring communities—not those who are wounded.

The wounded produce a different kind of love—a selfless love (Brock & Parker, 2001). Selfless love is a violated and unequal love because it requires those who are incomplete due to woundedness to give up even more of themselves for the sake of their

violated relationship. Such love is abusive (Brock & Parker, 2001) and serves to exacerbate the empathetic bonds between oppressor and oppressed; empathetic bonds of this sort are too violated to be useful (Brock & Parker, 2001). The present discourse categorically rejects selfless love because it attempts the ridiculous imitation of God's love for humanity; because humanity is by definition not divine, it is irresponsible for theology to encourage humans towards divine emulation. Humanity can and should model the service of Jesus to the oppressed and Jesus' concern with right relationships; humanity can never, however, emulate the divine and self-sacrificing love of God (through Jesus) for humanity and should not try. A loving, wounded God does not demand such sacrifice (Brock & Parker, 2001) because God desires humanity's wholeness, not brokenness (Park, 1993).

### *Salvation*

Salvation is a state of harmonious relationship with other humans, nature, and God (Park, 1993). Salvation is a process that begins internally with the wounded individual. Once an individual is restored through a caring community, he or she (now capable of embodied love) joins other caring communities and begins to heal others who are wounded. At the same time, the restored individual can also begin redressing the relational, institutional, and environmental sins she/he committed. Such repentance on the part of the healed sinner can help the sinned against who lack caring communities to heal as well (Park, 1993, 2004). In this way, Han can be resolved and humanity can come closer to achieving earthly salvation. Such a process may never be fully attained; human fallibility must be taken into consideration (West, 1993a). Healed individuals may

commit sins either because they become violated again or because they choose to (for whatever reason) deny God's presence (Brock & Parker, 2001). Yet such actions can be mitigated by education against selfish individualism. If the present social education (i.e. dominant ideology) which encourages mind-body separation, profits over individuals, and exploitation over mutuality, has produced a Han-filled world, surely education directed at cooperation, sustainability, and embodied love can stave off sin and oppression.

### ***Oppressor/Oppressed Binary***

In a world where sin and Han interact (Park, 1993), it is likely that most individuals experience degrees of both privilege and oppression, dependent on the social context being examined (Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984). Given such a situation, essentialized notions of oppressors and oppressed are inadequate concepts around which to develop a re-articulated black theological discourse. Instead, recognition of varying degrees of privilege and oppression allows the complexities of both sinners and sinned against to be honored. This is not to suggest that all oppression is equal; clearly, some individuals are more oppressed than others and some wounds of Han run deep, while others may be more superficial (Park, 1993, 2004). Relevant to black Americans, economic changes resulting in social mobility for some blacks and relegation of others to an ever-expanding under class suggests multiplicities in black oppression and privilege (hooks, 1993a) that are not captured by the oppressor/oppressed binary.

The recognition of varying degrees of privilege and oppression also contests the assertion that God sides with the oppressed. God desires the wholeness and healing of all



humanity (Park, 1993). To deny the complex relationships of privilege and oppression which are derived from the interlocking spheres of domination (Collins, 2000) that plague our civilization is to deny both the oppressed and the oppressors their full humanity (i.e. their wholeness).

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, when the complexity of the oppressor/oppressed relationship is honored, the faulty logic behind notions of the oppressed saving the world becomes clearer. It has been argued that oppression clouds the mind of oppressors to such an extent that they cannot see their way out of their exploits; it is only the oppressed who have the purity and clarity of perception to liberate themselves and their oppressors. Yet this aesthetically pleasing philosophical scenario does not play out as beautifully in application. Suppose an educated black woman scholar experiences marginalization in her white male dominated field, but exerts her heterosexist privilege in her church as she participates in homophobic actions against gays and lesbians. In such a scenario, the woman is both an oppressor and oppressed. How can the part of her that exerts homophobic oppression discern a clear path to liberation for the oppressed? Are the gay and lesbian individuals she oppresses allowed on such a path? Just as this woman needs to be healed of the alienation she feels from her job, she also needs to resolve the Han of homophobia she perpetuates in her church.

Individuals need healing and wholeness whether they are sinners, sinned against, or as usually occurs, both. Wounded, Han-ridden individuals need immersion in caring communities willing to bear witness to their suffering. The violated bonds of oppressor/oppressed need not be revisited in order for healing to occur. God's love does

not demand this. In reality, the sinner and the sinned against may never reconcile with each other. Each can emerge from a caring community and go on to work jointly (though not necessarily together) to dissolve other existing structures of Han. If they do reconcile, the sinner must initiate reconciliation out of a changed heart, not guilt or obligation. The latter would only serve to keep the sinner bonded to the sinned against out of guilt (Brock & Parker, 2001); such a relationship is neither reciprocal nor conducive to wholeness and healing. In this way, the oppressor is responsible for her/his own redemption and the victim is not made into vehicle for sinner's salvation (Brock & Parker, 2001).

### ***Ontological Suffering***

Suffering does not ennoble (Townes, 1993). No group of people was created for suffering, born to suffer, chosen to suffer, especially suited for suffering, or have, through their suffering, redeemed the world. Suffering from natural causes (i.e. acts of God) must be anticipated and managed, but suffering from human volition cannot be considered the will of God. Suffering must not be valorized to encourage those who suffer to bear their burdens in stoic fashion. All of these notions are components of theology that is both irresponsible and politically dangerous. All humanity is responsible for saving/repairing/restoring the world. All of humanity can participate in dismantling the structures of Han and domination.

### ***Christianity and the Bible***

I saw in Christianity's ideas about Jesus, a theology that made people passive and acquiescent in their own suffering, a legacy of abuse entrenched in doctrine. I could see that human beings were not led to trust their own wisdom, power, and capacities to love, but always to turn to another more powerful than they and to

confuse the pain and emotional entrapment of abuse with love. (Brock & Parker, 2001, p. 158)

The dilemma of this section, expressed so eloquently by Brock and Parker (2001), also speaks to the overarching theme of this project—that of appropriation and liberation. If Christianity (and by extension, the Bible) are riddled throughout with oppressive meta-narratives and politically dangerous messages for the oppressed, why should they be retained in a theological discourse that attempts to transcend oppressive meta-narratives and politically dangerous themes? Why not instead advocate praxis of secular humanism? To further nuance this question, consider Audre Lorde's famous quote about the dangers of using patriarchal tools in the service of liberation. Lorde (1984) writes:

. . . the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change. (p. 112)

Lorde's quote makes salient the dilemma of this project and begs the question of whether the project of liberation founded on the 'master's tools' of Christianity and critical analyses is necessarily doomed to failure.

The Christian message is largely propagated through use or misuse of the Bible—the purported word of God. Riddled as the Bible is with patriarchal authority and oppressive themes (Weems, 1991), is the Bible a tool of the master designed to maintain the status quo it legitimizes? The larger theoretical question being posed here is one of appropriation. Is Black theology, appropriated largely from black interpretations of Christianity and the Bible, included in the arsenal of the 'master's tools' or can a

theology so circumscribed by Protestant Christian discourse be molded into a counter-hegemonic weapon of liberation utilizing more of the ‘master’s tools’ (i.e. critical and deconstructive analyses)? Here a closer examination of the usage and treatment of the Bible by black Americans is useful.

The Bible is a political document, created to “. . . advocate and shape social behavior according to certain ideals” (Weems, 1991, p. 72). Many of the ideals advocated in the Bible exhibit androcentric bias and serve to legitimate ideals supportive of an elitist, male hierarchy (Weems, 1991). Moreover, previous biblical analyses and interpretations served to legitimate Eurocentric domination, relegating content about blacks and other non-Europeans to the margins (Felder, 1991). Thus, the Bible, as it has been presented through Protestant Christian discourse,<sup>46</sup> problematizes both the female gender and the non-European race/ethnicity (Felder, 1991; Weems, 1991). Yet given these problematics, the Bible has been historically and remains a source of comfort, guidance, and inspiration for black Americans and an integral part of black religious life (Felder, 1991; Grant, 1993; Hoyt, Jr., 1993; Wimbush, 1991, 1993). Speaking to the significance of the Bible in contemporary black life, Cain Hope Felder writes:

Even persons who question the continuing power of the black church in the black community cannot miss the influence of the Bible in providing the language, the imagery, and the cadences in which black people inside and outside the church, communicate their experience. (1991, p. 7)

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<sup>46</sup> See Cain Hope Felder’s (1993) “Cultural ideology, Afrocentrism and biblical interpretation” for a fascinating explanation of ways in which Eurocentric ideology denied and minimized the significance and presence of Black people and culture in the Bible and of biblical support for multiculturalism, racial tolerance, and racial/ethnic plurality.

It must not be assumed that black Americans, who have historically and in contemporary times relied heavily on the Bible to provide meaning for their lives, are exhibiting false consciousness or lack sophistication in reading the Bible (Weems, 1991). Instead, many black biblical scholars have pointed to the nuances in black culture and the reading strategies derived from black culture that reconcile discrepancies between oppressive Biblical texts and liberatory understandings.

Several scholars of the bible have credited the aural tradition initiated by enslaved Africans for allowing contemporary black Americans to receive liberating messages from the Bible. Slaves were forbidden to learn to read for purposes of control (Raboteau, 1978; Weems, 1993); as a result of the physical deterrent to literacy, slaves developed an adaptive aural tradition wherein actual Biblical texts became less important than "...the telling and re-telling, the hearing and re-hearing of biblical stories" (Wimbush, 1993). Blacks, first as slaves, and later as 'free' disenfranchised people selectively appropriated those biblical stories that spoke to their desire for liberation and ignored the passages that were understood to be oppressive (Grant, 1993; Raboteau, 1978; Weems, 1993; Wimbush, 1993). The following quote by biblical womanist scholar Renita Weems discusses the historically aural interpretive process of black Americans in the following passage. It is quoted at length to convey the full implications of her thesis. She writes:

Because slaves were not permitted to read for themselves, their exposure to ideas, notions, concepts, knowledge, and information was chiefly through word of mouth. Indeed, one piece of literature that was intentionally and consistently made "available" to them, namely the Bible, was communicated through public readings or sermons. As to be expected, the transmitters of the Bible in a slave culture rehearsed and interpreted the contents of the Bible as they saw fit. Thus what the slaves learned of the Bible's content, however was that the very material

they forbade the slaves from touching and studying with their hands and eyes, the slaves learned to claim and study through the powers of listening and memory. That is, since slave communities were illiterate, they were, therefore, without allegiance to any official text, translation, or interpretation; hence once they heard biblical passages read and interpreted to them, they in turn were free to remember and repeat in accordance with their own interests and tastes. (Weems, 1991, pp. 60-61)

For Weems, the experience of oppression resulted in adaptive interpretive strategies that required resistance to those elements of the Bible that contradicted or threatened to harm black Americans' understandings of identity, worth, and survival in order to preserve their emotional, mental, and religious well-being (Weems, 1991). Weems' statement is provocative. It has been emphasized throughout this chapter that survival strategies—such as the above aural tradition of black Americans, lack libratory power. Weems' previous quotation suggests that black biblical interpretations are not bound by the limitations of the actual biblical text. Although an exploration of the libratory implications of Weems' thesis is beyond the scope of this project, such an assertion deserves further inquiry.

Scholarship also continues to emerge in biblical hermeneutics that may create spaces for interpretations of biblical text that refute patriarchy, racism, and misogyny (Felder, 1991; Hoyt, Jr., 1993). It is true that contemporary scholarship in biblical interpretation has shed light on previously marginalized biblical voices in ways that highlight the contributions of people of color to biblical history (Felder, 1993; Martin, 1993). These and other scholarly avenues hold promise for relieving some of the Eurocentric domination that currently pervades the Bible.

While the extent to which biblical scholars will be able to liberate the Bible remains to be seen, the fact remains that the Bible is a significant force in black American life (Weems, 1993; Wimbush, 1993). This project cannot ignore the relevance of the Bible for many contemporary black Americans. Regardless of the oppressive messages of biblical content, some individuals' identities are inseparable from their religious and cultural beliefs and practices (Lugones & Spelman, 1990). To advocate for black Americans to relinquish the Bible and/or Christianity would be to initiate violence on individuals with a vested emotional, psychological, and religious interest in Christianity. A re-articulated black theology of healing and wholeness cannot seek to rupture individual identities in such a way. That having been stated, biblical texts and interpretations, being humanly created, are not immune to critique. Exposure to such critique may prompt individuals to reject those biblical texts and interpretations that do not encourage transcending oppressive limitations.

It remains to be seen whether or not Christianity will maintain its central role in so much of black life. Given the context of postmodernity, Christianity as the 'absolute center' of black theology becomes problematic. In the introduction to "The Global Context" in *Black Theology: A documentary History, volume 2: 1980-1992*, James Cone (1993) writes: "No longer do I feel comfortable speaking of Jesus Christ as the absolute and final truth of God's revelation." (p. 355). Allowing the possibility for multiple ways of experiencing God's presence and liberating message, numerous theologians have called for increased dialogue between Christianity and other faiths (Cone, 1993; Hill,

1999; Roberts, 1993, Silva, 1999). Renee Hill (1999) captures the complications of the postmodern condition for Christianity in the following passage.

Black Christian theologies cannot afford not to be in dialogue with other religious traditions. As expressions of transformative power and resistance, black theologies cannot function in isolation. The Christian hegemony that has controlled and defined African American religious discourse is being challenged by African Americans who practice Islam, African-derived traditional religions (including Santeria, Akan, Yoruba, and Vodun), Buddhism, Judaism, and Humanism among other traditions. As part of their internal mechanism for critique, black Christian theologies of liberation first must be aware of themselves within the history of Christian dominance in relation to other religious expressions in the United States. Second...black theologians must be willing to be open to learning from other traditions on a variety of different matters, including the meaning of freedom, oppression, and full humanity. This openness will necessitate wrestling with the ambiguity and anxiety that arise when the absoluteness of Christ as the one and only way to God and to salvation is called into question. (p. 147)

The religious dialogue Hill and other liberation theologians call for may very well result in religious transformations to black theology that ultimately include Christianity and the Bible as one of multiply centered perspectives, marginal perspectives, or defunct perspectives of the future. This remains to be seen. The relationship between the postmodern condition and Christianity also, necessarily, calls into question the relationship between the postmodern condition and black theology.

### ***'Black' Theology?***

Black theology developed out of and was a response to white supremacy and the inferior status it conferred onto black life (Anderson, 1995). In particular, black theology critiqued the implicit collusion of North American theology in white supremacy; such collusion was demonstrated chiefly through its silence on the social, economic, and



political exploitation and degradation of black Americans (West, 1993a). Necessarily then, black theology originated within the context of a 'modernist sensibility' that also ushered in ideologies of black power and essentialized understandings blackness expressed through racial discourse (Anderson, 1995; hooks, 1993a). Beginning in the mid 1970's, however, the discourse of postmodernity<sup>47</sup> emerged as a challenge to essentialized or universal concepts (McGowan, 1991) and consequently, as a challenge to 'black' theology as well.

The far-reaching consequences of 'capitalist civilization' and Third-world imperialism (West, 1993a) have resulted in economic shifts both in the U. S. and abroad that have also changed the influence of race on black oppression (hooks, 1993a; West, 1993b). The simultaneous upward mobility of some blacks and the ever-increasing relegation of others to the urban underclass have resulted in a situation where for some black Americans, other forms of oppression (gender, sexual orientation, religious etc.) may take on more salience than oppression occurring from race/ethnicity (Hill, 1999; hooks, 1993a). Such differences may render oppressive experiences of the U. S. black economically exploited underclass more similar to the experiences of economically exploited third-world persons than those of middle or upper class black Americans (Collins, 2000; West, 1993b). Thus, for 'black' Americans, organizing 'black' theology around the concept of racial identity becomes problematic.

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<sup>47</sup> While scholars debate whether conditions in the present are sufficiently different from the period of modernity to warrant the phrase 'postmodernity' (See for example Bauman, 1995 or McGowan, 1991), the phrase postmodernity used here refers not to an actual period of time, but to the discourse which attempts to theorize, explicate, or investigate the concept of postmodernity.

It has been argued that the adjective ‘black’ is a misnomer which suggests a biological rather than sociological designation into the group referred to as black Americans and as such, inadequately conveys the complexity of identities that comprise the social construction of blackness<sup>48</sup>. Race is given social meaning for political and socio-economic reasons (Collins, 2000). But those defined as black have various cultural and ethnic expressions (Hill, 1999; hooks, 1993). There are multiple and competing identities of blackness instead of one form, image, or norm for blackness (Collins, 2000; Hill, 1999). Referring to the social construction of race, theologian Renee Hill writes:

Recent discourse about race, along with gender and other aspects of identity, has come to the conclusion that race is not to be understood as a matter of essence or biology. Race is socially constructed. Being black or any other race is defined and understood within a broad context of history and culture. (Hill, 1999, p. 140)

The essentialized racial discourse of early articulations of black theology lacked creative spaces within which black Americans experiencing forms of oppression other than from race/ethnicity could strive for liberation (Anderson, 1995; Hill, 1999). The silence of many black theologians on gender oppression and homophobia, for example, led not only to new avenues of black theological inquiry (i.e. womanist theology and black gay and lesbian theology) but to the call for more complex understandings of blackness as encompassing multiple cultural, economic, social, and political locations (Anderson, 1995; Hill, 1999; hooks, 1993a). These scholars believe that while “. . . the permanency of race as an effective category in identity formation” (Anderson, 1995, p.

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<sup>48</sup> See for example Victor Anderson’s (1995) *Beyond ontological blackness* or bell hooks’ (1993) “Postmodern blackness” for explanations on the difficulties of adequately capturing the identities intended to be subsumed by the adjective of blackness.

11) is conceded, awareness is needed of the ways in which black Americans negotiate their multiply located identities in complex ways. Yet while the concept of ontological blackness (i.e. racial reification) presented in modernity was problematic, some scholars also make problematic the acknowledgement of postmodern blackness.

Cornel West (1993b) for example, is suspicious of ‘postmodernism’ because the ideology of its ‘modern’ precursor was instrumental in the essentialization, devaluation, and exploitation of oppressed people. Additionally, West (1982, 1993b) observes that while blacks in America existentially experience the postmodern condition<sup>49</sup> of the Other, they will unlikely find in postmodernism tools of liberation because postmodern exploration of concepts such as difference and otherness remain disengaged from the plight of the oppressed in black America. While bell hooks (1993a) is hopeful of the liberatory potential of postmodern discourse for oppressed black Americans, she, like West, is critical of exclusionary academic debates on postmodernity that appropriate the concepts of difference and otherness but fail to “incorporate the voices of displaced, marginalized exploited, and oppressed black people.” (hooks, 1993a, p. 512). In the following passage, hooks writes:

It is sadly ironic that the contemporary discourse which talks the most about heterogeneity, the decentered subject, declaring breakthroughs that allow recognition of Otherness, still directs its critical voice primarily to a specialized audience that shared a common language rooted in the very master narratives it claims to challenge . . . Third world nationals, elites, and white critics who passively absorb white supremacist thinking and therefore never notice or look at black people on the streets or at their jobs, who render us invisible with their gaze in all areas of daily life, are not likely to produce liberatory theory that will

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<sup>49</sup> West (1982, 1993b) argues that blacks in America embodied the postmodern condition through experiences of degraded otherness and subaltern marginality.

challenge racist domination, or promote a breakdown in traditional ways of seeing and thinking about reality, ways of constructing aesthetic theory and practice. (1993a, pp. 512-513)

Theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1998) calls attention to the exclusive language of postmodernism that acts as a barrier of access to many marginalized people. More importantly perhaps, Collins (1998) and hooks (1993a) both question the benefits to the dominant society of a set of theories which interrogate notions of subjectivity and authority and thereby undermine black people's and black women's group authority at the exact time when black women and other marginalized individuals are gaining voice around these attributes.<sup>50</sup> In such instances, real struggles over identity and authority are reduced to discursive play that holds little potential for political action and social transformation (Collins, 1998).

Given these considerations, contemporary black theology faces a potential dilemma. Efforts to move beyond static notions of blackness make collective bonding for social change difficult (Collins, 1998, 2000); such efforts also run the risk of overshadowing black Americans' historical experiences of sorrow and triumph in America and the unique culture, sensibilities, and survival strategies resulting from those experiences (hooks, 1993a). On the other hand, maintaining recognition of blackness as a natural or essential racial identity tends to reify the social construction of race (Anderson, 1995; Collins, 1998) in ways that gloss over the diversity of individual identities within the group of people known as black Americans (hooks, 1993a).

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<sup>50</sup> Nancy Hartsock (1990) makes a similar claim in "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?"

That black theology has been able to withstand a de-centering of the modernist theme of black oppression/white racism through the eruption of womanist, gay and lesbian, humanist, and third-world theologies is significant. The “center” of black theology may no longer hold, yet if the volumes of contemporary work that exists on black theology are any indication—black theology remains a viable force for Christian-inspired conceptualizations of the many facets of oppression which impede healthy human relationships in the ancestors of enslaved Africans and the people they share the world with.

The resilience and highly adaptive nature of Black theology suggests its viability for non-black American individuals as well. Both bell hooks (1993a) and Cornel West (1982) contend that the existential feelings of uncertainty, alienation, and despair best characterizing experiences of black Americans in modernity are now, due to the postmodern condition, a shared psychological state of most people in the world. For hooks this existential condition—referred to as yearning, cuts across racial, class, gender, and sexual oriented boundaries and is a potential site for the promotion of common interests and bonding (hooks, 1993a). If this condition of yearning which has typified much of the black experience in America (hooks, 1993a; West, 1982) is conceptualized as a manifestation of symbolic blackness (West, 1993a) or ideological blackness (Hill, 1999) rather than ontological blackness (Anderson, 1995), a re-articulated, fantastic, embodied, emancipatory black theology can provide a framework for understanding and ameliorating yearning in ways that are liberatory in words and actions.

This chapter has presented constituent fragments of a fantastic, embodied, emancipatory black theology and attempted to construct those fragments into a viable re-articulation of black theology for social transformation. It has been argued that such transformation is ultimately pedagogical—consisting of internal and external educational processes. The primary discourse utilized in this chapter has been theological, yet the goal of this project (i.e. transcendence of oppression through repaired human relationships) necessarily finds expression in educational discourse through articulations pursuant to social justice. The final chapter of this book will discuss points of convergence between theological and educational discourses of transcendence (i.e. social justice). In this way, the re-articulation of black theology explicated in this chapter is placed within a broader pedagogical framework designed to foster social justice.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **SO WHAT DOES ALL THIS HAVE TO DO WITH EDUCATION . . . REALLY?**

It is a symptom of the false separation between mind and body or body and spirit (Brown Douglass, 2004) that such a chapter as this is even necessary. The separation of church and state in U. S. culture presumably dictates that matters of the spirit have little to do with matters of the mind. For the purposes of this chapter, education is understood in its broadest application as the means through which individuals learn ways of being in harmonious relationships with themselves and others. In this regard, the re-articulation of black theology proposed in this book is necessarily educational. More specifically, the ideas suggested in chapter four, though articulated through a discourse of theology, are the same ideas articulated through discourses of peace education and social justice. In order to explicate this point, the purpose of the present chapter is to detail key theological themes articulated in chapter four along with corresponding educational themes relevant to social justice. These key theological themes include: (a) belief in human agency for social transformation; (b) notion of the sacred; (c) contesting the given-ness of hierarchical structures of domination; (d) recognition for erotic love and compassion; and (e) salvation.

#### **Human Agency for Social Transformation**

A major theme expressed in preceding chapters of this book was the belief in human agency to solve local and global problems of dominating economic, social, and

political relationships. While this theme is prevalent in the political discourse of Collins (2000), the religious discourse of numerous black theologians chronicled in Chapter II (e.g. Garnet, 1843/1925; King, 1967; Stewart, 1833/2002; Walker, 1829), the black theological discourse of Pinn (2004) in Chapter III, the religious discourse of Andrew Sung Park (1993, 2004) and Brock and Parker (2001) in Chapter IV, such a belief in human agency for social change also is prevalent in the educational paradigm of critical pedagogy.

In an article questioning the role of education in social transformation that is directed towards a peaceful society, Purpel (2003) utilizes a spiritual framework based on “that which inspires and gives breath to” (p. 255) to argue for human responsibility in social transformation. Purpel argues that social justice requires moral outrage over human suffering and belief in truth-telling<sup>51</sup> and healing as crucial steps toward social transformation. Human agency in these efforts is imperative. He states:

What is absolutely crucial to redemption is human responsibility and human agency since these traditions require that we act as God’s agents, dedicated and committed to constructing and sustaining intentional communities based on joy, love, peace, and justice. (Purpel, 2003, p. 257)

Discussing school violence within the broader context of peace education, Shapiro (2006) argues for deliberate human efforts to resolve conflict and to understand and respect human differences in the interest of social justice. Making clear connections between social justice and education, he states:

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<sup>51</sup> Purpel (2003) refers to this process as confession and witness.



It can and needs to be the result of deliberate human efforts to develop understanding and sensitivity that nonviolent behavior demands . . . In the broadest sense our greatest human challenge—to end the violent nature of our existence—is an educational one (Shapiro, 2006, p. 469)

Henry Giroux (2006) argues that public schools should be sites which encourage critical democratic participation (i.e. opportunities for students to critically reflect on socio-economic conditions that shape human relationships and opportunities for educators to be ‘engaged and transformative intellectuals’ (32) in efforts to critically interpret history, empower students, and ally with other cultural workers) for social justice. Discussing the human agency required for critical democratic citizenship and social justice, he writes:

Teachers need to become bearers of public intellectuals and engaged critics capable of resurrecting traditions and memories that provide new ways of reading history and reclaiming power and identity in the new interests of creating a democratic society that affirms difference, justice, equality, and freedom...If democracy is not to fall victim to a growing ethnocentrism, individualism, and consumerism, at the very least educators and others can work together to develop a political and ethical discourse that provides a rationale for students and others to comprehend democracy as a way of life that consistently has to be fought for, struggled over, and rewritten as part of the practice of critical citizenship (Giroux, 2006, p. 33)

Thus whether the goal is realizing a peaceful society, eliminating school violence, or utilizing schools as sites for encouraging democratic participation, these works clearly reflect the need for human agency in bringing about conditions that foster social justice. In doing so, these works, like the re-articulated vision of black theology discussed in chapter four, encourage changes in individual insight and relationships that create conditions necessary for social justice.

### **Notion of the Sacred**

Explicit and implicit in chapter four is the notion of the sacred. Explicitly, this re-articulated black theology endorses a belief in a beneficent God who desires the creation of cooperative, loving, and peaceful human relationships. This project also endorses the belief that the sacredness of each human life (Shapiro, 2006) provides implicit justification for the need for all of humanity to experience relationships free of forms of domination that violate the sacred nature of human life. These notions of the sacred also are reflected in educational discourse.

In an article explicating the concept of engaged pedagogy, bell hooks (2006) argues that education as a liberatory practice involves the educator's commitment in the learner's wholeness and well-being; in making this claim, hooks invokes the belief in education as a sacred act. She writes:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information, but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply begin. (hooks, 2006, p. 137)

In "The Grace of Great Things: Reclaiming the Sacred in Knowing, Teaching and Learning" Parker Palmer (2006) explores the possibilities of recovering the sacred in the institution of education. Although certain that a reverence for the sacred—that which is worthy of respect—is needed in education, Palmer concludes that educational institutions are ill-equipped to infuse notions of the sacred into learning environments. Instead, he

suggests that educators carry the onus for re-introducing and sustaining the sacred in education. Palmer (2006) writes:

I don't think institutions are well suited to carry the sacred...Institutions have their utility. They have jobs to do...But I don't believe that the qualities we are talking about here are going to be carried institutionally...I believe these are qualities *we* carry into the world in our hearts, through solitude and through community. (p. 171) (emphasis author's)

Both authors suggest that whatever else it may be, meaningful education involves notions of the sacred. While the authors do not make explicit mention of the divine in their works, they nevertheless honor the theme of the sanctity of human beings through their arguments that sacredness originates from human activity. In this way, these works are clearly linked to the notion of the sacred espoused in chapter four of this book.

### **Contesting the Given-ness of Hierarchical Relationships of Domination**

James Cone's early work in black theological reflection was integral in establishing that relationships of domination presented to subjugated people as originary and given could be contested. Countless black theologians have utilized Cone's methodology to re-articulate similar interpretations of reality. While such contestations are arguably the basis of academic black theology, they also are prevalent in educational discourse which seeks to provide counter-claims against antidemocratic, market-driven, exploitative and socially unjust modes of education.

Though the present circumstances of our global existence have been characterized as interlocking matrices of economic, social, and political oppressions manifested as racism, sexism, homophobia, class oppression, ageism, localized monopoly capitalism,

and global economic imperialism (Collins, 2000; West, 1993a), significant numbers of educators have provided counter-discourses which, like the re-articulation of black theological discourse developed in chapter four, challenge the inevitability of these various forms of oppression and exploitation.

In an article exploring issues of tracking, cognitive ability, and segregation Hudak (2006) problematizes the practices of educational placement by questioning in whose interest such systems of sifting and sorting children into segregated groups of 'regular' and 'special needs' groups serve. Rather than accepting the seemingly harmless nature of prevailing attitudes that 'there is a place for everyone,' (p. 402) Hudak questions the moral and ethical issues of placement and in doing so reveals inherent inequalities between those who have power and authority to assign social identities and those who are denied voice to contest their assigned placement in the world.

Risner (2006) interrogates the context of heterosexist bias, anti-gay prejudice, and other hierarchical relationships of domination that manifest themselves in the oppression of socially marginalized groups to reveal ways in which dominant ideologies organize privilege for some and oppression for others. Referring to the importance of participating in these interrogations of the given for the future educators he teaches, Risner writes:

. . . I find it helpful to outline the manner in which the dominant culture not only organizes political, social, and economic privilege for some, but also separates, discredits and discriminates against others . . . Simply, put, when we refer to the dominant culture and its ideology we are referencing the assumptions, ideas, concepts, and values that prevail in the central ways in which we organize our lives. Although usually associated with the 'taken for granted' socio-political realm, or more plainly, people and their relationships to power, dominant ideology powerfully colors societal opinion, behavior, and worldview. At the same time, the unquestioned nature of dominant culture allows a commanding

control that unfortunately benefits some people at the expense of others . . . (2006, p. 290)

In her controversially received article “The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People’s Children,” Delpit (2003) deconstructs white educators’ relationship to the ‘culture of power’ (p. 151) in schools and the effects of this unacknowledged power on the education of children of color. Importantly, she dispels the assumption that seemingly good intentions (especially those that conceal culturally-biased agendas) are sufficient criteria for educating for equity and social justice. Instead, Delpit argues that issues of cultural and community context cannot be ignored relevant to educational issues; white educators who teach children of color must interrogate their relationship to the culture of power and acknowledge the privilege it affords them. To pretend such power differentials do not exist is, for Delpit, to participate in the perpetuation of the status quo. By making problematic the unacknowledged power and authority conveyed through middle class culture and values, Delpit suggests culturally appropriate understandings of education that facilitate social justice for all children.

Responding to recent increased attention to the plight of boys in schools, Kimmel (2006) makes problematic the normative conceptualizations of masculinity that undergird the issues of boys, violence, and schools. Arguing that rigid gender stereotypes impede boys’ emotional development and leave them isolated, Kimmel suggests that such rigid conceptualizations marginalize boys who fail to measure up and encourages them to “prove” their masculinity in ways that impede academic achievement, male-female relationships, and peaceful school environments. By contesting the thought processes

which excuse male violence through a ‘boys will be boys’ (p. 284) mentality, Kimmel contests the given-ness of a constituent piece of patriarchal domination.

Finally, Villaverde (1998) discusses youth identity as a contested site of power and explores art as a medium for mobilizing youth to resist systems of domination through radical democracy. She argues that the ability of art to traverse socio-cultural and economic barriers makes it particularly useful in critical pedagogy because art provides conceptual spaces within which youth can work through issues of articulating marginalization and dissonance, raising critical awareness, etc. Thus, Villaverde posits art as a tool for youth to both understand and resist those structures of domination that seek to control them; in doing so, she articulates a means through which youth can join in the process of dismantling structures of social injustice.

Though seemingly disparate, the works cited above each attack specific matrices of domination which underpin structures of social injustice. Through their interrogations of the prevailing hierarchical structures of domination, the authors suggest that education, rather than perpetuating the status quo, can foster transcendence. This theme of transcending hierarchical relationships of domination links these works to the re-articulated black theology discussed in chapter four.

### **Education as Erotic Love and Compassion**

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need . . . But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world and around us, then we begin to be

responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like their only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within. (Lorde, 1984, p. 58)

In the passage above, Audre Lorde speaks to the power of the erotic—that resource which resides within a ‘deeply female and spiritual plane’ (p. 53)—in resisting social injustice. While such associations between the erotic and social justice have been posited in the black theological re-articulations of this book, they also find applicability in educational literature. There, emphasis on erotic (non-sexual) love and the care and compassion it engenders, have assumed their place within certain educational discourses.

For example, Garrison (2004) proposes the concept of eros or passionate desire as a heuristic for understanding and re-constructing self-creation within community. While self-actualization (referred to by Garrison as selfish self-creation) encourages social injustice, self-creation inspired by eros involves learning to play creatively and well with those who differ from us. Such passionate self-creation in the context of community provides, for Garrison, the foundation of participatory democracy. Thus through an embrace of the education of eros, Garrison links social self-creation with social justice.

Though other educational discourse does not explicitly name the concept of the erotic, advocacy for such constructs as compassion, care, and love are integral to notions of the erotic presented in this book (i.e. the desire for connection, union, and reciprocal relationship with others). In a similar manner, Pennell (2006) invokes the theme of compassion when she argues that social justice demands the creation of compassionate communities within schools. Such communities are imperative to counter the prevailing

educational system which for the sake of rationalism, denies students' wholeness. She writes:

. . . I propose the creation of compassionate communities in schools . . . this is not a sentimental notion—I am not so naïve as to think that schools will be transformed by a sudden influx of compassion. But I do believe that a classroom, where ostensibly the purpose is to make discoveries together, is a natural place for compassionate community to develop. The first step in this development is to rethink and re-act existing power structures in the classroom, consciously seeking to value and recognize every member of the community. (Pennell, 2006, p. 41)

Pennell suggests that the desire to suffer and celebrate with others in community is necessary to end social injustice.

Additionally, hooks (2003b) argues that human desires for love and connection have been replaced by an excessive acquisitiveness that feeds social injustice. For hooks, the steps necessary for social justice are clear: by living simply, we can reconnect with our capacity for compassion, care, and social justice. She writes:

We can resist the temptation to greed. We can work to change public policy, electing leaders who are honest and progressive . . . We can show respect for love. To save our planet we can stop thoughtless waste. We can recycle and support ecologically advanced survival strategies. We can celebrate and honor communalism and interdependency by sharing resources. All these gestures show a respect and a gratitude for life. When we value the delaying of gratification and take responsibility for our actions, we simplify our emotional universe. Living simply makes loving simple. The choice to live simply necessarily enhances our capacity to love. It is the way we learn to practice compassion, daily affirming our connection to a world community (hooks, 2003b, p. 498)

Finally, Shapiro (2003) sums up the relationship between education, compassion, and social justice. Rather than achievement measured through increased test scores, he



argues that education is about learning to live together peacefully and compassionately.

Discussing this greater purpose of education, he writes:

Education . . . is ultimately about something much more precious and profound. It is about the making of a world; about kids learning what it means to be human and questioning the ways that individuals can live together. In short, and in its most profound sense, education is not a transmission belt for acquiring technical skills or a competitive edge over one's peers. It is about developing selves that have the moral, spiritual and cognitive capacities to live in just, compassionate and responsible communities. (Shapiro, 2003, p. 476)

I argue that implicit in the above educational discourse advocating for compassionate, loving, and just communities is also advocacy for the erotic in education. This advocacy for the erotic, like that articulated in chapter four of this book, is the recognition that the work of social justice involves genuine care, compassion, and desire for the well-being of and connection with those with whom we share the world.

### **Education as Freedom and Salvation**

Having cited educational discourse germane to themes of human agency for social transformation, notions of the sacred, contestation of hierarchical structures of domination, and education as eros, the remaining content for this section will focus on presentations of education as freedom and salvation.

#### ***Education as Freedom***

Most notable for her argument that education be conceived of as the practice of freedom is Maxine Greene (1988). In *Dialectic of Freedom* Greene explores ways of acting on individual freedom that also honor the context of community within which individuals are necessarily situated; developing such acts of freedom is for Greene, a

pedagogical process. Thus, she argues that education, rather than continue on its current course of training students to fill allotted spaces within the status quo, should develop and nurture possibilities of re-imagining the world. Greene posits that education, properly conceived, is “. . . a process of futuring, of releasing persons to become different, of provoking persons to repair lacks and to take action to create themselves” (p. 22). Yet such self re-creations must be undertaken with criticality, compassion, and solidarity with others to honor the dialectic between the individual and her or his socio-cultural community. Greene’s conceptualization of education—pushing against perceived constraints within the context of communal solidarity and compassion—necessitates a democratic approach to social transformation that all of humanity is required to participate in. She writes:

It remains a matter, for men and women both, to establish a place for freedom in the world of the given—and to do so in concern and with care, so that what is indecent can be transformed and what is unendurable may be overcome. (Greene, 1988, p. 86)

Like Greene, Paulo Freire (1970, 2001) also posits education as an act of freedom. While his placement of the onus of responsibility for change on the oppressed to liberate themselves and their oppressors has been problematized in this book (see Chapter IV), Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* nevertheless provides an invaluable contribution to social justice work through its argument for education as a praxis of freedom which can further the processes of humanization. Through his denouncement of banking education and his advocacy for dialogical education through which educators and learners become “both simultaneously teachers and students” (p. 72) by jointly naming and transforming

the world in order to humanize it, Freire presents a model of education as a means to free individuals from oppressive forms of knowledge and from relationships of domination.

***Education as Salvation***

J. Krishnamurti (1953/1981) provides an explicit link between education and salvation in his book *Education and the Significance of Life*. For Krishnamurti, education properly conceived can change the world by developing individuals who are free from fear and capable of sustaining peace. Correct education directs one away from selfishness and acquisitiveness and cultivates within the individual an integrated understanding of life—of the interconnections between self, other humans, nature, ideas, and things (Krishnamurti, 1953/1981). For Krishnamurti, social change occurs only after individuals realize fundamental change (i.e. education) within themselves by perceiving the essential ‘what is’—the capacity to understand the interconnected nature of life and to love. He writes: “Education in the true sense is helping the individual to be mature and free; to flower greatly in love and goodness.” (Krishnamurti, 1953/1981, p. 23). Stated differently, education is, for Krishnamurti, discerning and changing wrong relationships. In the following passage, Krishnamurti explicitly links education and salvation.

Right education comes with the transformation of our selves...We must learn to be compassionate, to be content with little, and to seek the Supreme, for only then can there be the true salvation of mankind. (Krishnamurti, 1953/1981, p. 50)

Greene (1988) and Freire (1970, 2001) establish a relationship between education and freedom; Krishnamurti establishes a relationship between education, freedom, and salvation. Like the re-articulated black theological discourse discussed in Chapter IV,

these works suggest that the ways in which we understand our selves and our relationships with others (i.e. education broadly conceived) determines the extent of our freedom and, ultimately, our salvation.

This section has discussed thematic elements of various educational discourses of social justice that correspond to the central theological constructs adopted in chapter four of this book. The purpose of this demonstration was to identify ways in which the re-articulated black theological discourse offered here can be understood as an educational project. Although the theological language utilized in this project is specific, the ideas articulated transcend the specificity of the theological language used. Rather than being isolated from each other, the theological and educational discourses cited represent different branches of a general social justice framework.

While a framework of critical pedagogy is used here to locate black theology within an overarching paradigm of education for social justice, such an inclusion is not meant to imply that critical pedagogy (as demonstrated in the above works) is immune to critique. Though it is beyond the scope of this chapter to outline critiques that have been leveled against critical pedagogy (see for example Burbules, 2000 or Ellsworth, 1994), it can be generally argued that critical pedagogy, like the other social justice projects discussed here, is also limited by its reliance on the imagination paradigm. Indeed much of the work of educators like Maxine Green is based on the importance of imagination for freedom. As has been previously argued in this book, imagination, while helpful in reordering relationships of power to make them more humane (Pinn, 2004) fails to

promote transcendence. It can therefore be argued that critical pedagogy, like black theology, requires an infusion of the fantastic for transcendence.

#### Black Theology, Fantastic Pedagogy<sup>52</sup> and Possibilities of Transcendence

The main question guiding this philosophical exploration has been whether ways of being in relationship articulated through black theology and other subjugated forms of knowledge can transcend relationships of domination. I believe it is appropriate to conclude this thought project with some ruminations on possible classroom implications of a fantastic black theology/pedagogy because my experiences of teaching undergraduate students illustrates many of the tensions and complications I have attempted to articulate in this book.

For several years, I have taught a social foundations of education course which explores diverse social issues relevant to education and social justice (e.g. homophobia, racism, gender stereotyping, ability grouping, poverty, etc.). Although each topic is challenging, the most difficult topic of each semester invariably involves racial issues in education. This difficulty comes, I believe, as much from my experiences with racial oppression as from the reluctance of many students in the class (who are predominantly white and female) to be confronted with issues of race. When I began teaching the course I was excited about the possibilities it held for helping public school students realize social justice, by “enlightening” their future teachers. Yet I was somewhat naïve to the emotional toll teaching such a course to predominantly white students would have on me.

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<sup>52</sup> This term is adopted from a phrase used by Glenn Hudak during a conversation about this project.

My deeply held belief that the educational system perpetuates racial inequality guides me to teach in ways that cause future educators to interrogate their own racist assumptions as well as the educational practices that help sustain inequity. As a result, there are generally a number of students in each class that display varying levels of resistance to the information I present. When discussing issues of race it is not uncommon for students to argue that racism was certainly an issue in the past, but is presently no worse and consequently no more deserving of emphasis than other social issues. Certainly, my own biases come into play during these discussions because I am a living witness to the reality of racism that many of these white students deny.

The degree to which I confront this resistance (i.e., whether I ignore their hostility, gently challenge it, or try to debate them out of it) determines the amount of mental fatigue I experience from these “consciousness-raising sessions” with students. Because of the emotional toll of teaching this course, I have consciously altered my responses to student resistance. When I began teaching the social foundations course, student expressions of resistance caused me to exert ridiculous amounts of energy trying to convince these students of the detriments of racism to everyone. For the most part, my efforts amounted to wasting precious energy that could have been used in the service of more worthwhile causes. I say this because these efforts left me mentally and emotionally exhausted and rarely achieved the change in student attitudes I desired.

I began to rethink my pedagogical strategy after discussing my frustrations with a friend (who also taught in social foundations). Student responses to his pedagogical approach to race convinced me that my efforts to convince white students of the realities

of racism were misplaced. My friend, who is white and male, routinely began his discussions of race with the statement that he, like all white people who reside in the US, is a racist, necessarily tainted by the white racist patriarchy of this society.

His statement arose no mutiny from the class; regardless of whether they were changed by his statement, they nevertheless *heard* it. Sitting with my friend, discussing his relatively painless introduction of white racist patriarchy to his class, I could not envision such a conversation occurring in my own class. In my class, students either persistently challenged or outright disbelieved statistics indicating negative school outcomes for race/ethnic minority students in public schools, legitimated the achievement gap between white and black students as a lack of motivation on the part of black students and parents, and framed affirmative action in college admissions as ‘taking opportunities away from qualified white students and giving them to unqualified black students.’

While the merits of such arguments are debatable, I believe that the expression of these arguments and my responses to them highlight several important and inter-related points that shed light on the possibilities for transcending relationships of domination. These points will be organized and discussed below in terms of several of the fragments of black theology/pedagogy previously adopted in this book. These include: (1) recognition of the need for safe spaces and caring communities; (2) attending to micro and macro structures of domination; and (3) categorical rejection of meta-narrative of ontological suffering of the oppressed.

### **Recognition of the Need for Safe Spaces and Caring Communities**

I have come to realize that, in many ways, it is unfair to expect students to “get it” in terms of acknowledging ways in which our society objectifies individuals because they are themselves objectified and oppressed. As Patricia Hill Collins (2000) points out, all individuals receive varying degrees of privilege and penalty within the matrix of domination. Yet while most people can readily identify their own victimization, they have difficulty acknowledging the significance of other forms of victimization or their own complicity in the victimization of others (Collins, 2000).

Like so many people in our society, I believe that many of the students in my class are hurting from their own oppression. To ask them to not only acknowledge the oppression of others, but to admit to their own complicity in that oppression is to ask a lot of these wounded individuals. To me it is like someone who has received a gaping wound without understanding why; she desperately thrashes around, trying to call attention to and receive care for her wound. In the process of her thrashing, she wounds someone else. When she is finally approached by another individual, it is not to care for her wound, but to make her confess to the wound she gave another. In such a scenario, the wounded person requires balm for her wound before she becomes willing to devote adequate attention to rectifying the wound she gave another. Perhaps if these wounded students who are often so angry that class time is ‘wasted’ on talking about issues of race had caring communities within which to grieve over their own hurt, they might emerge as much less angry and much more understanding people.



This observation applies not only to my students, but to me as well. Perhaps the fact that my own racial wounds have not been healed makes me much less sympathetic to student resistance to issues of race. Taking Collins' (2000) argument to heart about the degrees of penalty and privilege experienced by every one within the matrix of domination, I am required to take an honest assessment of the power that I yield over students in the classroom. Here Foucault's (1980) analysis of the inescapability of power relations proves most relevant. Describing ways in which all individuals participate in the circulation of power Foucault writes:

Power must be analyzed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a community or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. They are not only its inert or consenting target; they are always also the elements of its articulation. In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application. (Foucault, 1980, p. 98)

The social foundations course that I teach is a requirement which students must pass in order to graduate. In addition to students' coerced enrollment in this class, I subject students to my authority as an instructor by requiring them to learn knowledge that I believe is libratory and true. Thus from the student's perspective, their resistance may be as much about attempts to carve out spaces of mental freedom for themselves as about hostility to issues of race. They may very well experience my version of libratory education as an oppressive form of coercion. Given this context, safe spaces (Collins, 2000) or caring communities (Brock & Parker, 2001) where students and instructors

could experience learning that is geared towards freedom, healing, and repairing relationships would seem ideal. Yet relevant to Foucault's analysis of the inescapability of relations of power, such transcendent sites of restoration seem not likely to be found in the classroom. The inherent power differentials within the classroom context (at least in my classroom) seem to preclude college classrooms from being optimal places where caring communities can be cultivated.

Certainly, more exploration is needed about the boundaries and determinants of safe spaces within which caring communities can develop. While Brock and Parker (2001) do not specify the constituent elements of caring communities except to point out that they are comprised of individuals capable of discerning between healthy and empathetic love (100), Collins (2000) does note that safe spaces by their nature are exclusive communities. Exclusivity is necessary in safe spaces so that individuals can free themselves from dominant surveillance long enough to construct affirming and liberatory self-images of themselves (Collins, 2000). Thus, future questions relevant to safe spaces may explore the viability of safe spaces and caring communities for encouraging large-scale social justice projects. Additionally, information is needed on the psychological toll membership in caring communities places on individuals. For example, what are the long-term psychological consequences of bearing responsibility for restoring wounded individuals to wholeness? While this project advocates for the necessity of caring communities, the application of this concept to real world settings is likely to be much more complicated.

### **Attending to Micro and Macro Structures of Domination**

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) makes it clear that social transformation requires resistance to the status quo at both micro and macro structural levels. At the micro-structural level, resistance involves cultivating the mind as a space of freedom (Collins, 2000). This project contributes to Collins' formulation by proposing that healing the wounds of Han is a pre-requisite for such personal transformation. Although more work needs to be done relevant to safe spaces and caring communities, these concepts still seem to be promising for fostering resistance at the micro-level.

While the classroom context may ultimately prove inappropriate for cultivating caring communities, I believe the classroom is, nonetheless, a viable site for countering oppression in the hegemonic domain. In the classroom I have seen student thought-processes change in ways that encourage social justice. Education that provides alternatives to the negative images associated with social markers of difference goes a long way towards resisting hegemony. Such education can help individuals regain 'free minds' (Collins, 2000) by revealing to them the structures of domination underpinning socially constrained identities and images. Subsequent alterations in the ways individuals understand themselves and others can lead to changes in interpersonal relationships. Such changes serve to further contest the hegemonic domain by thinking and acting in ways that resist common sense ideologies which perpetuate domination. In this way, changes at the personal and interpersonal level can precipitate change at the structural and disciplinary levels of power (Collins, 2000).

### **Rejection of Meta-narrative of Ontological Suffering of the Oppressed**

My status as a black woman influences the reactions students in my class have, particularly to issues of race. Although my intimate familiarity with racism allows me to approach the nuances of this issue in ways that differ from those not directly impacted by racial oppression, my familiarity also causes me to take student resistance to the realities of racism personally. There is a heavy emotional cost associated with laboring to receive acknowledgement from students that they often, for many different reasons, refuse to give. To me it is quite significant that while my colleague and I both reached a small number of students by the end of our respective social foundations courses (likely ones that were already pre-disposed to hearing messages of social justice), his goal was accomplished with seemingly much less mental and emotional exhaustion – at least over the issue of race.

Here, then, is a major flaw that I have come to believe exists in the religious and educational literature which suggests the necessity of oppressed individuals in taking on the responsibility of saving the world. While I certainly don't believe that I am saving the world through the classes that I teach, I do think that I am doing important social justice work. The difficulties that I encounter, however, as someone experiencing oppression while at the same time trying to teach about it are considerable. These difficulties highlight for me the ridiculousness of any philosophy, theology, or pedagogy that encourages oppressed individuals that they must not only survive their oppression, but also save the world.

Relevant to my teaching experiences, I believe the work that I do is valuable, but not worth my emotional well-being. If teaching an undergraduate college course breaks me down psychologically, why and with what additional resources am I to save the world? When the embodied reality of oppression is acknowledged, the ridiculousness of such an assertion as the oppressed saving the world becomes obvious. My teaching experiences, therefore, underscore the destructiveness of perpetuating any version of the ontological suffering meta-narrative.

### **Possibilities for Reconciliation and Transcendence?**

This project is ultimately one of reconciliation, both on a personal and political level. Therefore, the final point of discussion for this chapter involves the possibilities for reconciliation and ultimately transcendence that this project holds. My advocacy of caring communities as places where the wounds of oppression can be healed stems from the absence of oppressor/oppressed relationships within these sites. According to Brock and Parker (2001), oppression creates powerful, empathetic bonds that suffocate oppressors and those whom they oppress. Because these bonds are never fully healed (Brock & Parker, 2001), revisiting them, even in terms of reconciliation becomes potentially detrimental to oppressed individuals. Brock and Parker describe the empathetic bonds of oppression as follows:

Racism, sexism, intimate violence, and homophobia are abuses of power that are devastating to love. They prevent us from being fully present and alive. They diminish the presence of spirit by wrapping oppressor and oppressed, perpetrator and victim, together in emotional chains that force the air out of the space between them. These claustrophobic emotional chains of abuse and oppression can be mistaken for love because their emotional power to bond is fierce. But such chains suffocate the spirit, two selves are fused into one, either of which can

give itself up to the other. Neither will notice the spirit is missing. (Brock & Parker, 2001, 157)

The violence that these bonds introduce can be quelled by caring communities, but never completely healed. While no longer traumatized by the violation of oppression, restored individuals nevertheless remain affected by violence; they incorporate knowledge of this violence into their worldview (Brock & Parker, 2001, p. 100).

In such instances, how can reunion between oppressors and those they have oppressed be beneficial? I do not believe that these empathetic bonds, which never fully heal, should ever be revisited. Even when the oppressor experiences a genuine change of heart such as by undergoing ‘conversion to the oppressed’ (Freire, 2001), he or she still bonds with the oppressed through the guilt of past misdeeds (Brock & Parker, 2001). These are not the bonds of reciprocal relationships; they are bonds of misery that use guilt to invert the power relationships between the former oppressor and the formerly oppressed (Brock & Parker, 2001, p. 41). Such instances amount more to power inversions than true opportunities for transcendence. This is not meant to belittle the significance of conversion to the oppressed, but rather to highlight the dangers of revisiting empathetic bonds of oppression. Oppressors who convert to the oppressed can make amends for their wrongs by working to dismantle systems of domination, but they do not have to and should not join in social justice projects with those they have oppressed. The risks for oppressed individuals are too great.

I realize that my perspective may appear overly pessimistic, but it takes seriously the embodied nature of oppression and seeks to prevent oppressed individuals from

experiencing needless violence – especially when that violence parades itself as reconciliation. Referring once again to the work of Patricia Hill Collins (2000), however, I realize that the observations made by Brock and Parker (2001) about relationships of oppression and the conclusion I draw from those observations do not represent the entirety of knowledge on relations of power. I speak from a perspective that is constrained by social a priori (Cone, 1975). Though I have tried to sketch out the constituent elements of a fantastic black theology capable of providing a pedagogy of healing, wholeness, and transcendence, my knowledge of this subject is incomplete because I have never experienced transcendence. My desire for social justice necessitates that I carry out this project despite these limitations. The task is now for others interested in social justice to learn from, critique, and build upon what I have written to further the cause of social justice.

### **Conclusion**

This thought project began by exploring the potential of a re-articulated black theology for transcending structures of domination and realizing earthly salvation (i.e. social justice through repaired human relationships). While many oppressive elements were found within the various historical and contemporary discourses of black theology, much liberatory content was also found. Most hopeful was the ability of this discipline to adapt to changing historical and social-cultural realities while still articulating a liberatory message. It is this highly adaptive nature of black theology that I believe makes it a suitable starting point for a re-articulated vision of social justice; I believe the nature of

black theology also makes it compatible with work currently being done in critical pedagogy.

In this chapter, I have used my teaching experiences to highlight some of the fragments developed in previous chapters of this book. Though there were some noted areas where application of these concepts to the classroom context proved difficult, I nevertheless believe that these applications demonstrate the viability of this project for social justice efforts. The re-articulated, fantastic, black theology/pedagogy presented here is not meant to suggest that all marginalized groups be subsumed under the category of blackness. It does suggest, however, that blackness can be understood ideologically (Hill, 1999) and symbolically (West, 1993) and that such conceptualizations, rather than privileging blackness, suggest that the noun blackness is particularly expressive of the tensions between oppression and activism (Collins, 2000) that characterize those impacted by the matrix of domination. As such, this re-articulated vision of black theology/pedagogy, which seeks to articulate paths of freedom out of the context of oppression, seems a promising starting point for engagement in coalition building with other groups interested in social justice. If the continued relevance of black theology is any indication, the success of a social justice project founded on a re-articulated vision of fantastic, embodied, pedagogical black theology seems fruitful.



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